

interzone

OCTOBER 2001

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interzone

science fiction & fantasy

OCTOBER 2001

Number 172

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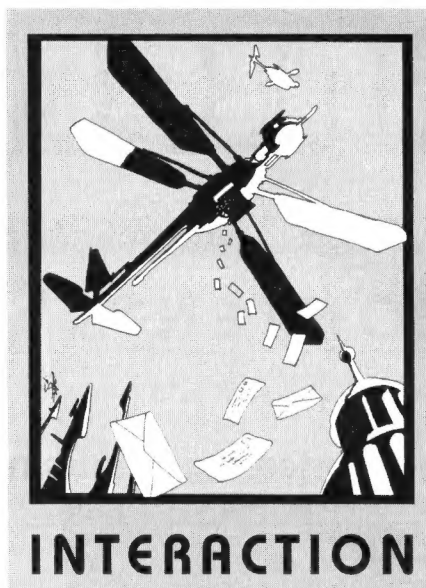
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Dear Editors:

I'm a member of the British SF Association, but somehow I most dynamically feel the community of sf through the nonfiction aspects of *Interzone*, particularly the letters page and "Ansible Link"; but even the book reviews contribute to my sense of contact, perhaps because you regularly have one of our best novelists doing the critique (Paul McAuley). I have to say that I thoroughly enjoy Gary Westfahl's articles, no less than the overly contemptuous responses he galvanizes from the readers. And the interviews are always welcome, but particularly good to see an outing for Lucius Shepard, a man we've seen far too little from in recent years. (If *IZ* ever takes it into its head to start a monthly Classic Short Story reprint feature, perhaps in another couple of decades' time, first candidate would be Shepard's "Life of Buddha," a masterpiece of anybody's genre of short story which can be found in his collection *The Ends of the Earth*). Recently I've discovered Linda Nagata, her novel *Vast* being the most intriguing and inventive and advanced sf I've read since... well, maybe ever! She's the female Greg Egan, and *Vast* is a delight. Can we see an interview with her?

Whenever an issue of *IZ* arrives through the letterbox, I read all the nonfiction immediately, and then put the zine aside for later savouring of the fiction. This resulted in a backlog of unread fiction from January 2000 until this month, when I decided to catch up. This method of reading the magazine has demonstrated to me what an amazingly high standard of fiction is consistently turning up in your pages. In attempting to select the best for nomination for BSFA Best Short Story of the Year, there were a couple of issues I wanted to nominate almost every story! There's virtually never a piece you could dismiss as a "filler"... although I must say the zine has been force-fed too much bloated diction from Richard Calder over the last year or so. I did gain a perverse(!) pleasure from his overblown prose, in the way a truly bad film evokes delighted outbursts of disbelieving laughter, but the joke has worn very thin indeed, under its squamous rind of thick-laden verbosity... I can only imagine he has been reading bad Victorian novels, but the style has definitely overstayed its retro visit.

One exciting new discovery is Tony Ballantyne. "A New Beginning" was a fine piece, but his "Restoring the Balance" binary tale (takes 1 & 2) was a condensed novel of well-realized and worked-out ideas, truly questing into new sf-nal territory. Quite brilliant in conception as well as execution. I trust he'll be topping the poll next year. But perhaps I shall be disappointed in that



hope, as I was amazed to discover in this year's poll that Mat Coward's deeply thoughtful and engaging work "We All Saw It" failed to even place! I wish I'd read last year's fiction in time to vote, now, since it seems a single vote can make quite a difference, seeing the numbers involved. How could such a truly deep piece be so overlooked? Dealing with such core sf-nal subjects as perception of the unknown (indeed, perception *per se*), and psychologies of perception and of being, and interpersonal communication, i.e. the effects on community of traumatic cultural experience, even engaging with a real cultural phenomenon (UFO abductees, whose belief is a reality, even if we sophisticated sf readers can see so easily the nonsense of their beliefs)... this story was truly great sf. Perhaps people were put off by the UFO aspect, but really the story was not about UFOs or believers in UFOs, it was about the psychology of dealing with the unknown... and I'd encourage everyone to go back and reread it. It's a masterpiece... and goes some way to providing an outlook for people trapped in an unsuitable reality, which is no small thing!

Syd Foster

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Westfahl on Spinoffery

Dear Editors:

Gary Westfahl's piece on spinoffery (*Interzone* 170) is just the latest inconclusive contribution in a debate that shows precisely why sf is treated with such derision by those outside its various conventions and clichés.

Letters for publication should be e-mailed to interzone@clix.co.uk – or sent by conventional post to our editorial address (shown on the contents page). Please note that we reserve the right to shorten letters.

Even at its best, spinoffery is second rate art; the literary equivalent of the Star Wars games children played in the streets after seeing the movie. Writers of spinoffery, similarly dazzled by the brilliance of another author's creation, turn the gold of originality into the base metal of pale imitation.

The dispiriting popularity of spinoffery – like the equally depressing proliferation of branded chain pubs – testifies to the vast number of people who want the "same again" – whether franchised fiction or ersatz ale.

When I read Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, I remember feeling utterly bereft that the author had not written a fourth, fifth and *n*th volume in the saga. Had he – or some hack spinoffery artist – done so, I'd have lapped them up. But thankfully, I had to move on to new worlds, new literary experiences. None of these would be the same as my experience of Middle-earth but all would have the unique flavour of originality. So when I see someone reading spinoffery, I feel they are wasting their reading time on a universe when a multiverse is there for the taking.

Adrian Fry

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Dear Editors:

In his piece on *Star Trek* novels Gary Westfahl says he's given up sifting through these works in the hope of finding something readable.

I'm here to recommend to you three books in that series which I think are good work by anyone's standards. They are Diane Duane's *My Enemy*, *My Ally*, Janet Kagan's *Uhura's Song*, and John Ford's *The Final Reflection*. These authors have managed to work within the tight rules Paramount set for these books and still produce genuine and original stories.

Andrew Barton

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Memento

Dear Editors:

Though the film *Memento* might not have come under Nick Lowe's remit, strictly construed, it's a shame he didn't review it, because I'm sure it would have been of interest to many *Interzone* readers. Certainly, any Philip K. Dick fan who missed this at the cinema should make plans to see it on video, because I can't think of another film that confronts the strangeness of identity in such an uncompromising fashion – certainly not any of the lame Hollywood versions of actual PKD.

Greg Egan

Perth, Western Australia

Evelyn Lewes, Yet Again

Dear Editors:

I am a fairly new American subscriber to *Interzone*. Recently I received the July 2001 issue, and was somewhat surprised to see so many letters taking exception to Evelyn Lewes's previous media commentary column. That is, until I turned to Ms Lewes' column in the same issue. I believe that Ms Lewes is absolutely entitled to her opinions, but she has no business reviewing, in a professional publication, television shows about which she knows so little. Both the *Farscape* and *Babylon 5* portions of her column are full of errors and typos (although some of the latter are probably not her fault).

First, Ms Lewes calls Crichton an "American-from-the-past" and states that he's been flung into the far future. It is my understanding that the worm-hole transported Crichton through space but not time; the events on *Farscape* are taking place in a distant part of the universe, but they are happening in Crichton's own time-frame (presumably only a few years from now). Ms Lewes then complains that she's not sure how to spell D'Argo's name since character names don't appear in the show's credits. Perhaps she could have looked at the official *Farscape* website (www.farscape.com) – the very first link is "characters" or at one of the various fiction and nonfiction *Farscape* books that have been published, including in the UK. She also talks about the two central "human" characters, so she either neglects to mention, or more likely does not know, that while Aeryn Sun looks human, she is Sebacean. Speaking of Aeryn, the photo caption and a line in the text call this character "Aerin," while another line of text (five lines down from the first) calls her "Aeryn." Poor D'Argo's photo caption mentions his "magnificent" teak nose.

Ultimately, if Ms Lewes is not willing to invest time in a little rudimentary research, she should stick to writing for fanzines rather than a magazine for which I am paying \$60 per year. Is it possible that *Interzone* is publishing Ms Lewes's essays simply to stir up controversy and generate letters to the magazine? Please, let's have a little more professionalism, editing and proofreading. Surely there are other, more qualified reviewers who are willing to spend time watching and researching the shows they want to critique.

Amy Sisson

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Dear Editors:

I can only assume that Evelyn Lewes's column was commissioned as a bad-

natured response to people like myself who miss "Tube Corn." It's a "OK, we'll give you a TV column – but we'll get someone who hates science fiction on TV to write it and who is ultra-thin-skinned as well" (I assume Evelyn's critique of the wording of the voiceover at the start of *Babylon 5* is in response to Farah Mendlesohn's misguided letter on her grammar).

As someone who has tried to like *Farscape* and has so far failed I must admit I took some "shameful joy" in reading Lewes's criticisms of the programme at the start of "Farscape – Near Miss." I, however, began to revise my attitude towards the review of *Farscape* when I read Lewes's criticisms of *Babylon 5*.

First of all, I thought, given that *B5* is well known for having a five-year arc, why watch four "stand-alone" movies of which two are outside that arc? If she is going to watch programmes via a video, why not tape four or five episodes over a week and then watch those when she has a few spare hours? That way she gets a feeling for the story arc.

From reading Evelyn's review of "In the Beginning" it seemed apparent that she did not realize that the scenes with Londo ("the major Centauri character") were set in the same period (almost certainly the same day) as that of the "future Emperor Londo" parts of "War Without End" (parts 1

and 2) and that the scenes with Sinclair interrogated by the Minbari were almost shot-for-shot the same as "And the Sky Full of Stars."

However, not knowing a story arc is one thing, but missing the point of a story is another. The Minbari don't surrender because they realize Earth people have souls but because they discover Sinclair's soul is identical to that of their spiritual leader, Valen. As Evelyn had not got that point I semi-assumed the movie had not made this clear – ("And the Sky Full of Stars" doesn't spell it out, as its purpose in the story arc is to tease the viewer). However, after watching the conclusion of "In the Beginning," Delenn clearly spells it out to the viewer. "The human has a Minbari soul, and not just any Minbari soul – the soul of Valen." Delenn then goes on to speculate (wrongly) on why Sinclair has the soul of Valen, and comes to the conclusion that the humans must be important in the forthcoming struggle against the Shadows.

I can assume Evelyn's misinterpretation of why the Minbari surrender (because humans have souls) is because either she missed Delenn's speech, or because she, having been criticized for disregarding the show in the previous article, is just being wilfully spiteful against it.

Her criticism of an episode "where two Narns were fighting... to see who'd be leader of the gang," indicates the spitefulness theory. From the description I think it is the episode where the Centauri (who have defeated the Narn in war) bring in a "quisling" Narn to lead the Narn on Babylon 5 ("A Day in the Strife"). In that episode, G'Kar breaks up a fight between the rival Narn and his own supporters. He then decides to voluntarily return to the planet Narn to face almost certain execution to try and avert the arrest, imprisonment and execution of his supporters' families by the Centauri, who have turned the planet into a Death Camp.

If this is the episode Ms Lewes rubbishes in her article perhaps she could explain why she chose to misrepresent it so much. What does come across to me is that Evelyn Lewes seemed to set out in "Farscape – Near Miss" to rubbish both *Farscape* and *Babylon 5* by any means possible. In the case of *B5*, this included lying about the content of the episodes she actually deigned to watch.

I have bought your magazine since edition 29 and have written only once before to praise the J.G. Ballard issue. However, I feel angry that someone who exhibits so little integrity should be given space to write a much-needed television article.

I buy *SFX*, *Dreamwatch*, *Cult*

Readers' Letters continue on page 66

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The Invisible Hand Rolls the Dice

Carolyn Ives Gilman

At 35,000 feet over the Indian Ocean, Lee Pao Nelson paused to re-evaluate his life. There was plenty of tangible evidence to score himself by. It was his 30th birthday, and here he was in first class, a piquant glass of merlot on the tray table in front of him, leather upholstery underneath him, his understated Joseph Abboud suit shrugging off the wrinkles. Most people would have felt smug to be sitting in the market segment he had achieved. And yet the clicking of stylus against screen across the aisle was a torture of indignity. The overweight man in seat 3B was hunched over his notebook, day-trading intently on the personality market – where Lee, despite all his achievements, was not yet listed.

Defiantly flipping open his own notebook, Lee checked today's styles to find if he needed to upgrade anything before landing. His personal shopbot was recommending a new watch with a holographic orrery display. Before he could decide whether it would add to his ensemble, the flashing e-mail icon distracted him.

WE HAVE WHAT YOU DESIRE, the message glowed in his in-box, in defiance of the best spam filters available. He deleted it irritably and tried to concentrate on a way of customizing the watch to display his individuality, taste, and access to information. Consumption took more skill and attention every day. If only he were publicly traded he would be able to deduct the cost of a true personal shopper, not just a bot that could only respond to trends. He could *set* trends then. In fact, he would be expected to.

WE HAVE WHAT YOU DESIRE, the e-mail materialized again in his in-box. He stared at it, a little insulted that such a downmarket come-on had gotten through to him twice. His stylus hovered over the delete box, but somehow, when he clicked, it was on "open."

An entrancing face stared out from his screen through a veil of visible pixels. It was a cheap, poorly resolved video clip, but that only seemed to enhance the mystery of her expression. She had Asian features, pearl-skinned and waiflike, and there was unmistakable apprehension

in her look, as if she saw and recognized Lee as her destiny. Then she looked down shyly and a smile touched her lips, almost too subtle to be sure it was there. In it Lee glimpsed the wisdom of generations of captive women shaped by cruel custom to excel in ancient arts of delighting and easing men. The combination of vulnerability and knowing seized his heart, and a portion of his anatomy considerably below that.

The face was gone almost as soon as he saw it, and was replaced with some tinny Oriental music and the cover of a catalogue of mail-order women. *These delightful Asian ladies will fill your home with satisfaction*, the ad copy went. Lee clicked through page after page of thumbnail photos, searching for the waif he had seen so briefly.

The man in 3B closed his notebook cover with a satiated sigh. Lee quickly changed screens to make it look like he was doing work. "That was a good session," Mr 3B said.

"Oh?" Lee said absently. "Who were you trading?"

"You wouldn't recognize them. I get 'em before they're household names. The up-and-comers – you know, media personalities, politicians, hedge fund managers. High risk, high reward. You traded?"

It was just a conversation opener, Lee told himself, not a calculated putdown. "No," he said casually. "How about you?"

"Since I was eleven years old," 3B said. "I was one of those Young Entrepreneur picks."

Lee felt a slow burn of hatred.

"At 14 I founded a company that pioneered ME2ME commerce, cutting out the aggravation of dealing with other people. By the time I was 19 I'd paid off my parents' initial investment. I haven't owed the old bag and goat a thing since then."

Lee was still struggling to repay his own parents' investment – not that they pressed him for it. They seemed to think it was all a gift, all those diapers and hockey lessons and premium schools. It made Lee guilty whenever he saw them, to know how bad a return they had gotten.

"I've issued a dividend every year since my IPO," the

man went on – then without asking, pointed his business card at Lee’s notebook and beamed him the information. “Check out my web page.”

When 3B lurched up to weave down the aisle to the bathroom, Lee took the chance to look him up. He felt a malicious satisfaction to see the man had a “sell” rating from Morgan Stanley. He’d been counting on Lee not to do the research.

Back to the problem of the watch, Lee racked his brains for some distinct characteristic to set his watch apart, some creative individual touch. Something that wouldn’t bring disrepute on his market segment or skew his profile or make him less employable. A message blinked into being in his in-box: THE WATCH IS NOT WHAT YOU DESIRE.

With a frisson of paranoia, Lee clicked on the message, and it took him back to the catalogue of women. He shook his head, admiring the company’s marketing software in spite of himself. He paged through, looking at faces – pleading, brazen, dull, glamorized faux Western – but none with the ineffable Asian mystery that had gripped him. The message was right, he thought; the watch was *not* what he desired. The lack of something had him in an itchy state of vacillation and restlessness, unable to land.

There was a search box at the bottom of the screen. He typed, “I want” but did not finish, and did not send the message. He was not sure what to search for.

YES, I KNOW. The words appeared in his in-box. YOU WANT.

“I want to see her again,” Lee typed.

YOU SHALL.

“When?”

TONIGHT. ALL HER LIFE HAS BEEN PREPARATION FOR THIS NIGHT.

A tug of yearning made his thighs hot and his palms clammy. “Where?”

PETALS. RANGOON SKYMALL. 9:00.

“How much?”

There was a slightly disapproving pause. WE ARE NOT IN THE PROSTITUTION BUSINESS, MR NELSON.

Blushing in spite of himself, Lee typed, “Then what?”

WE SELL LIFE FULFILMENT. TO HAVE WHAT YOU DESIRE YOU MUST GIVE MORE THAN MONEY.

What more *was* there?

The answer flashed onto his screen in the form of a sales contract. Scanning it quickly, Lee decided it was an immigration scam. He would sign a declaration of his intention to marry the woman provided. Within a month he could cancel the contract with no obligation, but by then she would presumably be settled in one of the countries in his pocketful of citizenships. His unspoken reward was a month of her companionship.

There was something altruistic in it, he thought as his stylus wavered over the “Reject” box. She must be fleeing something, whatever caused that alluring glow of anxiety in her face. Instinctively, he knew it would not be simple. She was in danger, some third-world danger he could not understand – something inscrutable and Oriental. It had to explain the urgency of the marketing.

Caution told him not to get involved. It could entangle him with international smugglers, identity thieves. The thought was distasteful... and thrilling. Ten minutes ago, his future had seemed mapped out before him. His stock options would vest, and he would settle down. First would come the house in a gated community, and with it major appliances. He would trade in his neglected Maserati for a family armoured vehicle. There would come the backyard swimming pool, the European ski vacations, the entertainment centre, the exercise room, all the major life acquisitions. And the dogged work to pay for it all, to stay ahead, not to fail...

How many chances would he get to do something risky, shady, out of character – in fact, to be a hero?

He typed, “Will it be...”

IT WILL BE HER, the answer came. YOU HAVE BEEN MATCHED BY OUR SOFTWARE DOWN TO LEVEL 8. SUCH A DEEP MATCH IS UNUSUAL.

Marketing shtick, he knew. At the same time, he *had* sensed an affinity, like a key fitting in a lock. High risk, high reward. He felt reckless and brave as he clicked on the “Accept” box and pressed his thumbprint on the scanpad to seal the contract. THANK YOU FOR DOING BUSINESS WITH DIGITAL DESTINY, INC. flashed cornily on the screen. Lee settled back with the smile of an unfooled but satisfied customer. The publicly traded Mr 3B was on his third vodka blitz; Lee felt a deep sense of superiority. He might not be listed on the personality exchange, but he now had a rendezvous with a woman who would fit him like a Speedo.

Lee’s business meeting that afternoon was in one of the finance capital towers of Rangoon. He had been there many times, but had no idea what it looked like from the outside. It was not necessary to go outside to get there from the air terminal; it was connected via the immense skymall. After showing his Proof of Insurance at the immigrations booth (passports were *passé*; liability was all local nations cared about), Lee flagged down an electric rickshaw. It whisked him through bright corridors lined with Harrod’s and Gap stores. They passed a towering atrium featuring one of the Kipling’s colonial-revival theme parks, where Burmese children in pink plastic pith-helmets rode mechanical elephants, and a chorus line of costumed Gurkhas sang “On the Road to Mandalay.” At last they arrived at the lobby of the business tower, where an actual façade from Angkor Wat had been shipped in and reassembled stone by stone to frame the elevator doors. Lee rode to the 47th floor.

The prospective franchisee, Abdul Yousefi, turned out to be an austere, business-suited sheik with a dark beard and thick, black-rimmed glasses. Lee shook his hand, then greeted the financier, Anatoly Rubichek, a beefy Romanian in sunglasses with a rose-red pimple on his chin. *Gangster*, Lee thought behind his smile. The success of the business had attracted a kind of character he preferred not to deal with; but capital was capital.

“Take a load of this,” Rubichek said jovially, holding out his wrist. On it was a watch with a holographic orrery display. “It is, as you Yanks say, *planetary*, man.”

Lee tried to strike just the right note of interest and sophisticated disdain, while silently blessing his stars that he had not bought the watch. He had to reprogram his shopbot.

"I expect Mr Lee is quite familiar with such things," the sheik said in impeccable Oxford English.

"Nelson," Lee corrected him.

"Pardon me. You are American, then?"

Always a difficult question. "Originally," Lee said. "Now, who knows?" He shrugged, smiling.

"Yes, indeed," Yousefi said thoughtfully. "Who does know?"

An office assistant entered with a tray of Turkish coffee, herb tea, and chai – drinks prepared according to the specifications entered on each man's notepad and automatically broadcast in answer to the room's wireless LAN query. Lee used the interruption to tap into the web and retrieve the files he would need. When the pleasantries were over, he was ready to launch his sales pitch.

He always started with a short video. The room lights dimmed, and one wall filled with a series of images invoking the anxieties of the postnational world: denuded hillsides, squalid slums, rioting extremists, flooded coasts, lootings and shootings. A woman's voice said, "The world is such a dangerous place. How can I know my property will be safe and my children will grow up? Who can I turn to? Who can I trust?" The sounds of violence and disorder reached a crescendo, succeeded by silence and blackness. Then the screen lit with an aerial shot of a sylvan lake. The camera swooped down, birdlike, between autumnal hills and over tranquil water, to show a grandfather and child fishing, all to the familiar strains of the World Church's theme song, "Someone Loves You," heard in daily ads on television sets worldwide. The calm, melodious voice of the Church's spokesman, Dr. Bob, said, "You have a friend here. You'll always have a friend at the World Church."

The video never failed to move Lee. He was that rare thing, a salesman who actually believed in his product. He knew, rationally, that the wise and fatherly Dr. Bob was a fictional construct with a carefully crafted biography; he had even participated in the panicky strategy sessions when the actor who played him died in a Mexican motel. At a deeper level, it didn't matter. What Dr. Bob symbolized was what counted. Belonging, trustworthiness, support.

The video went on to show impressionistic glimpses of life in World Church franchise communities: child care centres, health clubs, diet groups, creativity retreats, addiction recovery clubs. There were the ceremonies to mark life transitions: welcomings for babies, marriages, funerals, all within a tolerant, multiethnic community. It showed congregations in the Caribbean, Central America, Africa, Indonesia, harmoniously celebrating the same beautiful traditions, free of ancient prejudice and passion.

When the video ended, Lee waited for Abdul Yousefi's reaction, but the Arab was silent. In a tone that didn't break the mood, Lee said, "You see, our product is contentment."

The sheik said, "A life of no risk."

"Well, we can't make any express warranties. But –" Lee handed over the beautifully designed print packet outlining the company's church-related products "– in here you'll find information on our Sheltering Arms insurance program. It's the most comprehensive you can buy."

Still Yousefi said nothing. It was making Lee nervous; there was quite a lot riding on this meeting, and it would be seen as a test of his skills. Expansion into the Middle East was one of the World Church management's top priorities. It was the only major market they had not yet penetrated.

"Our package has been designed with the most exhaustive market research in the industry," Lee said. "We test every product to make sure it is what people really want from their church."

"What about God?" Yousefi said unexpectedly.

"We find that varies with the franchise area," Lee said. "Some congregations prefer a God, others don't. We go with the community norm, determined by polling. But it's our policy to keep God-references low-key and generic. In keeping with our multicultural mission."

"Ah," Yousefi said. "McGod."

Lee smiled. He did not find it insulting to be compared to a fabulously successful global corporation. "In the demographic we're aiming at, the cultural contrasts have already been smoothed out. I mean, they all grow up watching CNN and Disney, no matter where they're from."

"What about pre-existing religions?" Yousefi asked. "Do you ever encounter resistance from them?"

"Chain religions are constantly being accused of driving mom-and-pop churches out of business. Our research shows it's simply not true. They have their market, we have ours. Look, Christianity is a wonderful religion if you're downtrodden and depressed about it. Islam is great if you're downtrodden and angry. We're not targeting the downtrodden. The World Church is for the overachievers, the shareholders in society."

Yousefi raised one eyebrow. "Is it expensive to join?"

"We go on a percentage-of-income basis," Lee had learned it was best not to mention the exact percent at first. "It's very advantageous to our members, because we have an investment in their success, and do all we can to promote their advancement."

"How do you do that?"

"To begin with, our services reduce the stressful distractions of home life. We give members a nurturing, affirmative social network. And then, for members who opt for it, we will provide suggested courses of action in dilemmas, based on customized risk-benefit analysis."

"Like the astrological advice in the paper?" Yousefi's voice was ironic.

"No! This is based on actuarial science."

Yousefi shook his head in disbelief. "Pardon me, these concepts are very... Western. Do you offer no morals, no precepts to guide a person's action?"

Personally, Lee found commandments a turn-off, but some customers wanted them. "Our press has pulled together some compilations of the best Christian, Mus-

lim, Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist precepts,” he said. “They are the ones our polls showed to have the highest positive ratings, cross-culturally. You’ll find a catalogue in your packet.”

The sheik rose from his chair. Lee noticed that his drink was untouched – not a good sign. He seemed to be struggling with some internal problem. Lee wondered if he should launch into the profit-margin figures, but some instinct told him to stay quiet.

With his back turned, Yousefi said, “I cannot believe this is right – that this is the way we should worship.”

With his alligator boots on the coffee table, Rubichek the financier spoke up. “You can’t argue with success, sheik. The company’s got a rocket up its ass.”

Lee agreed with his point, though not with his vulgar choice of metaphors. “We have 439 franchises in 33 countries, with more opening at a rate of three a month. Our stock has split twice in two years. Our profits are – ”

Yousefi turned an impaling gaze on him. “That proves your price. Not your value.”

Earnestly, Lee said, “You don’t have to take my word for our value, Mr Yousefi. You can look to a force beyond our power. We cannot manipulate that force, or falsify it.”

“What force?” Yousefi said.

“The market. The market is perfectly rational, perfectly informed. It cannot be fooled. It has weighed us in the scales against all other human enterprise, and has found us valuable. It is the one verdict you can truly believe.”

There was a short silence as Yousefi gazed at his clasped hands. “My apologies, Mr Nelson,” he said at last. “I had taken you for a man without faith.” He sat down again with a resigned expression. “The fact is, my government believes it is in the state’s interest to prevent the security needs of our middle class from finding political expression. We need to deflect their demands, so that the free market may continue to enrich us.”

“Good,” said Rubichek. “Then tax-exempt status won’t be a problem.”

“I believe not,” Yousefi said. “It will be a public service.”

They dived into the details then. Lee was feeling giddily elated, a voice in his head singing, *I did it!* By the time they pressed their biometric signatures to the contract and Rubichek broke out the caviar and martinis, Lee barely needed the alcohol to feel that the world was going his way.

His mood lasted as he strolled out into the mall afterwards, waving off the rickshaw drivers. Before him, a glass-roofed atrium stretched away into hazy distance, six stories high with palm trees growing down the middle. And every floor was lined with bright and bustling shops. As he walked along the promenade, invisible lasers caught his retina scan and empty walls lit up with ads geared to his Lifetime Purchasing Record. It made him feel at once unique – he was proud of his LPR – and at one with the great community of shoppers.

It was in places like this that he could feel the numinous presence of the market all around him, the great collective mind and will that rewarded the deserving and pun-

ished the uncompetitive. The shops were beginning to decorate for some local festival modelled on the American Christmas. You could practically hear a global heartbeat: the majestic, seasonal ebb and flow of commerce, marking off time and business cycles. Life itself was a series of seasons, each with its own colours, theme songs, and logos. There was a time for every purchase under heaven.

Turning away from the balcony he had been gazing from, his eye caught a Lexus ad, and he checked furtively to see who it was aimed at. There was no one nearby but a gaggle of teenagers and a cleaning woman. A kiosk that had been hawking Nikes to the teens transformed into a De Beer’s display as his eyes swept past it. Secretly delighted, he pretended not to notice. He walked away down a busy corridor, transforming the walls with his presence, drawing envious glances. The glorious sense of power was quickly eroded by puzzlement. Pausing before a drugstore, where a panel enticed him to buy an upscale brand of cocaine, he took out his notebook. Either his LPR had gotten mixed up with someone else’s, or something had happened.

The explanation was in his in-box. He stared at the message, barely able to breathe. Half an hour ago, he had been approved for listing on the personality exchange.

It was a chasmic event. It had catapulted him into a whole new market segment, and the advertisers had found out before he had. Henceforth, untold capital would be his. He would have a worth, a market value. Swelling with elation, he started to jot down things he would have to do. Send out a press release. Circulate his resumé. Call his parents and offer them some options.

And then his eye fell on the last entry in his To Do list for the day: Petals, 9:00. It was as if the exhilarating slope had turned to ice underneath him. The risk he had taken earlier that day, when he had been a mere private individual, was yawning before him. He could not shack up with a woman ordered off the Internet – not Lee Pao Nelson, Publicly Traded. Investors would be searching out information about him. The disclosure laws meant his life, his finances, would be an open book. He had to buy her off, cover her up.

His mind raced ahead as his stylus hovered over the screen. If he tried to track down Digital Destiny and cancel the contract, he would just draw attention to it. No, the buyoff had to be an untraceable cash deal, and then he could claim the purchase had gotten on his LPR by mistake. Such things happened, random IP address flukes. But he would have to make the rendezvous and hand over the cash himself.

He checked to see what hotel he was booked at, and immediately realized it wouldn’t do. It was a hotel appropriate for his old persona, not for the new man he had become. He sent out his shopbot to get him a new reservation. A woman with shopping bags pushed past him to get into the drugstore, and he nearly shouted at her, “Can’t you see what respect I am due? Just look at these ads around me!”

He had not expected success to be so stressful.

The Rangoon skymall had so many wings that the archi-

tects had differentiated them by themes for the orientation of lost shoppers. Passing through that evening – on foot, because he was too jazzed to sit – Lee saw the Self-Improvement wing, the Medieval wing, and the Space wing before arriving at his destination, the Vietnam War wing, where Petals was located. With mirror-shades to block the retina scans, a layer of latex over his fingerprints, and his notebook set to “anonymous,” he was no longer preceded by expensive ads, mockingly showing all he stood to lose. It gave him an eerie sense of unreality. Without identity, he was reduced to the state of the elemental animals: he had no credit, no history, no achievements, no life.

The nightclub was six stories high and six stories deep, but even so there was a long line of people waiting to get in. It snaked out into the mall courtyard, where the walls were draped with camouflage netting incongruously decorated with Christmas lights, and a tank teetered precariously over a fibreglass embankment, as if about to crash down on the waiting crowd. Standing there, watching the glass elevator go up and down the windowed stories of the club, Lee felt distracted; his thoughts flew about like malarial mosquitoes, unable to focus or concentrate.

He had always assumed he would get married to someone custom-designed for his lifestyle. Her resumé would be educated and professional. She would be able to carry on a cocktail conversation and run a household with precision. He pictured her in a pastel business suit, perfectly made up, perfectly organized, a colleague ready to manage the procreational portion of his life.

The mental image left him feeling hungry; he checked his watch. 8:54. It was tantalizing standing out here, watching people enjoying themselves inside the glass walls, unable to get in. It left him in a consuming state of mind.

By 9:05 the line seemed not to have moved, and he began to fret at his inaction. After another five minutes of vacillation, he left his place in line and went to the door, where a Burmese hostess in a spandex dress stood barring the way.

“Reservation?” she asked him.

“No – that is, I don’t know. I was supposed to meet someone at 9:00. Maybe she made the reservation.”

“Her name?”

Of course, he didn’t know her name. He took out the cash chit he had gotten from a Swiss bank that specialized in the lucrative business of records erasure. Its surface reflected the light like a bull’s eye on her forehead, but she did not react. So he leaned close and whispered, “Digital Destiny.”

“Mr Nelson?” she said far too loudly.

“Yes,” he whispered.

“You may enter.”

Inside, the noise was like a physical force that battled gravity. Music throbbed up his legs, lifting him; loud laughter and conversation scattered his thoughts. He went to the bar to get a drink. With a glass anchoring him down he turned to survey the room. Though it seemed very crowded, it was difficult to tell how many people were actually there, because everywhere the view

was interrupted by pillars and panels of reflective glass that multiplied and concealed the patrons. A woman in a dress of netting passed in front of a mirror, and he saw her nipples duplicated a hundred times around the room.

He took out his notebook and set it on “receive” to find out who was there. As people passed him, their own notebooks broadcast whatever information they wished him to know. He picked up a wheeling kaleidoscope of names, incomes, web addresses, business cards, marital statuses, STD ratings, sexual preferences... There were sexual market segments here he had never even dreamed of.

The women were as glossy as photographs, shining with a shrink-wrap of style and sophistication. He could not help but admire the packaging. But she did not belong here. She was a child of the countryside, that unknowable place beyond the mall, beyond even the laws of exchange – a place so primal there was weather. She was a creature of dreaming mist, jade, and bamboo, not acrylic and hair spray. This place violated her very being.

He set the notebook to search for faces, and photographs of the patrons in the room started flashing on his screen, but none of them was her. Satisfied she was not in the room, he went to the spiral staircase in the centre of the club. For a moment he hesitated, debating which way to go, then decided on down.

A hostess greeted him on the next level, and he shouted over the din, “I’m here to meet someone. Do you know if anyone is waiting?”

She laughed. “There are a lot of people waiting. We’re all waiting.”

“Never mind,” he said.

This floor was, if anything, more obscure than the one above. Neon outlines of dancers undulated, mimicked precisely by real ones, or apparently real, their shadows made multiple by wheeling lights. The laughter and conversation had a buzzing overtone, as if piped in over strained loudspeakers. On screens around the room, projected faces laughed uproariously at jokes he couldn’t hear. He fled downward.

The drink had somehow made him thirsty, so he went to the bar and started to order when he realized the bartender was only a photo cutout advertising something. He looked around for a waitress, but no one was there, so he helped himself. It made him feel transgressive.

This floor had a minefield theme. Whenever a dancer stepped on a mine, smoke would billow from the floor and silvery confetti would rain down. Around the edges of the room, burners intermittently erupted in pillars of flame, luridly lighting nearby revellers. A group of young people were calling out to each other in Japanese, laughing in drunken hilarity. One of them came over to help herself to liquor at the bar. Lee tried to look up her name in his notebook, but she wasn’t sending. “Have you been here before?” he asked, then winced at what a lame line it sounded like.

She nodded. “Every night. I work here.”

“Oh, I thought you were with them,” he nodded at the rest of the group.

“I am. We’re all actors.”

"What are – oh, I get it. It's like one of those murder mystery parties, right?"

"Yeah, that's what it's like. Exactly."

He wanted to ask more, but she waved at him and dashed away, jumping over a burner just before it shot flame to the ceiling. He headed for the stairs. Down.

The next floor was partitioned off into booths of smoked plexiglas enclosing red vinyl banquettes. Almost all were occupied, but he found a free one and sat down. Through the partition he could indistinctly see the booth next to him, crowded with a group of Australians (by their accents) smoking something which (by the smell) was stronger than tobacco. They were making a raucous din, but it suited Lee. It had become obvious that he was not going to find her by wandering this place. If he had known her name he could have performed a search on his notebook. But she knew his. He was going to have to broadcast it and wait for her to find him.

He set his notebook to send his name. His drink was gone. The waitress kept coming to serve the Aussies, but never even glanced at him. He drew patterns in the water rings on the red formica tabletop, slowly growing irritated. And then he looked up and saw *her*.

She was separated from him by several layers of frosted glass, but he would have known that slim form anywhere. She was looking for him anxiously, with that shade of controlled desperation that made him feel so powerful, so crucial to her. He waved, but she didn't see him. Jolted from his seat, he found his path barred by partitions. Trying to keep her in sight, he rounded booth after booth, searching for a way through the translucent haze. Only the merest second did he lose sight of her, but when he breathlessly rounded the last corner, only a plaster cast of her was left, her face projected onto a blank white face-screen, urgently beautiful. The image faded as he watched.

Now he knew that someone was messing with him. Returning to his seat, he passed the booth where the Australians sat. They were all mannequins, and their boisterous conversation was a recording.

With a sudden clarity, it occurred to him that there might not be a single genuine customer on this floor but himself. When he checked his notebook, no credit histories popped onto the screen. Just as he had expected, nothing here was authentic. Nothing but her. She, he was convinced, was real, as much a victim of this place as he was.

Down he went again. The next floor was entirely unlit. As his eyes adjusted to the dark, the room filled with a swarm of moving dots fluorescing under invisible blacklights. They seemed to be patches worn by dancers; his imagination readily filled in the bodies, but there was no way to tell for sure. He moved gingerly forward into the dark, expecting to collide with someone.

A hand touched his shoulder from behind. He wheeled around. In the dark, his eyes strained vainly, but he felt her nearby.

"Do not look at me," she said. Her voice was soft, with an accent he could not place.

"Don't be ashamed," he said. She was self-conscious about her simplicity, thinking he actually wanted one of these

women so perfect you could almost see the mould lines.

"Lead me out of here," she said.

He had come to buy her off. The cash chit was a hard lump in his pocket. He could give it to her and go back to his life, leaving her without personhood.

Turning back to the steps, he said "Follow me." It was an insane act. He could not risk being seen with this woman, so foreign to everything about his life. What was he doing?

The explanation struck him as he set foot on the first step, and it felt like the most profound drunken revelation of his life. Sex was like commerce. Not in the superficial ways everyone could see, but on a deeper level. Both were like thermodynamic systems: they generated energy from contrast. As a battery creates electricity from reservoirs of contrasting chemicals and a water wheel generates power from contrasting levels of water, so commerce could only exist where there was difference – otherwise, what would there be to trade? Difference generated the energy that drove the flow of goods and ideas, and it was generating the sexual energy propelling him up the stairs.

He almost turned to tell her, but she said again, "Do not look at me."

The staircase seemed much longer going up than it had coming down. He kept passing floors he could not remember, and his legs began to ache with endless effort. Ten flights, 20 – how many had he climbed?

He knew he was near the exit when the hostess in the spandex dress barred his way, demanding payment. She handed him a computer printout of his tab, and it unfolded clear to the floor. As if a mere bill could deter him. Laughing derisively, he whipped out his plutonium credit card with its half-million-dollar limit. "Do you know who I am?" he said. "I am the chosen of the market. I walk among you, a negotiable instrument made flesh!" For a moment his attention was caught, fascinated, by the reflection of his own face in the surface of the card. Then he shifted it ever so slightly, to reflect what lay behind him.

For the merest instant he saw her face, suffused with dismay. Then there was an explosion of shattering glass, as if a whole tray of crystal goblets had gone down. Whipping around, he saw that she had broken into a million pieces; they bounced and skittered across the floor. With a cry of anguish, he fell to his knees, trying vainly to gather up the glittering shards. Already people were walking through them, scattering them, crunching them into atoms.

"What got broken?" someone asked.

"My wife," Lee said. His soulmate, his beloved, the only authentic thing he had ever purchased. The fragments sifted through his fingers. "My fragile wife," he said.

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Domie

Barrington J. Bayley

From where he squatted in his cramped cage, the cock hom had a clear view of the market concourse. The scene was colourful. He could watch as housewife schicks strutted from stall to stall, buying daily commodities, mostly foodstuffs. As the day wore on the cages around him emptied one by one. Fewer than half the homs in the battery were left now.

He went tense, shrinking to the back of his cage, trying to make himself invisible, as a schick came to inspect the battery. Her beak clacked as she talked to the stallholder. Her huge face, with its floppy red crest, came close to the front of the cage. Her beady, merciless eyes glanced at him, then passed on. She made a selection, pointing with a feathery arm, and clacked again.

She had chosen a younger, plumper cock, hardly more than a chick. The stallholder opened the front of the cage to pull him out, his limbs jerking in panic. Then came the ear-piercing shrieks as he was dunked in the pot of boiling oil, muffled when the stallholder jammed on the lid.

Minutes later the deep-fried hom was fished out with a slotted scoop, hastily wrapped, and handed over in return for a few coins. The older cock took his hands from his ears, enjoying an exquisite feeling of relief that it was not he who had gone into the seething oil. He did not want to be a cooked take-away. He knew that he was past prime cooking age and scrawny. It was his hope to be bought uncooked and then taken to a schick house and killed quickly, perhaps by having his head cut off, before being boiled or roasted for the evening meal.

Even better, to be still unsold when the market closed. Then he would go into the pen for the night and live till next day.

"Hey, you! Yes, you! Domie!"

He looked towards the sound of the voice. The schick's take-away had emptied the cage to his left, clearing the view to the cage beyond it. It contained a hen hom of strange appearance. Her skin was tanned and weath-

ered, not pale and soft like his. Instead of squatting docilely, she crouched in an aggressive, restless posture. Her black hair was tangled, her face angry, with flashing dark eyes.

"Yes, you!" she snapped. "What's your name? Stop staring like an idiot." Her face became contemptuous. "Oh, I forgot. Domies don't have names."

He knew what she was, even though he had never seen one before. She had to be a wild hom. They were rare. Farmers tried to exterminate them because they raided crops. In addition they were hunted for their flavour, said to be stronger and more piquant, a gourmet delicacy, though needing culinary skill. Consequently they were expensive. She had not been sold, and might not be today.

She shook the bars of her cage as though trying to break them apart, continuing to glare at him.

"What's the matter with you? Why do you just sit there? Don't you ever think of trying to get away? Say something. Or have the schicks ripped your tongue out? What did your mother call you?"

The torrent of questions confused him. His mother had called him "boy-chick," or had when he had known her, like all other boy-chicks. What else would she call him?

The wild hen bared her strong white teeth. "Say something. Or when I get out of here I'll bite your throat out!"

He shrank away from her. Everything he had heard about wild homs was true. They were savage and violent. They didn't go to paradise when they were eaten or died. That was probably why she was so frightened.

"Leave me alone," he stuttered.

She laughed, a yelping, delighted laugh. "Leave you alone! You *deserve* to go into the pot!"

He began to blubber. "That's not fair!"

She pressed her face against the bars, studying him. Her eyes dropped. She was looking at his dick, as though enjoying the sight.

"Do you have any children?" she asked softly. "Chicks, I mean. Do you have any chicks?"

Again his expression showed his incomprehension. "*Hens* have chicks!" he protested. "*Cocks* don't."

"Yes, but – " It was she who looked bewildered now. "Well, have you *fucked* any hens?" she asked him.

He nodded, still puzzled.

"Then..." She paused. "You mean you don't know... Oh, Great Mother Forest!"

Another housewife came clacking to the stall. They watched as a cage in the far corner of the battery opened. This time it was a plump young hen who was pulled out, wriggling and uttering mewling noises. He recognized her: she was from his farm. In fact he had... done what the wild hom had said with her. Then came the shrieks, more high-pitched than before, as she was pushed down into the oil.

They waited till the deep-frying was finished and the housewife strutted off holding her freshly cooked and wrapped hot hom. The wild hen surveyed the scene from her cage, glaring at the housewife, at the stallholder, at all who strutted through the market-place. Her face held the most malevolent hatred the cock hom had ever seen.

"*Schicks!*" she hissed. "*Schicks!*"

He had little idea what she had been trying to talk to him about, but he felt curious about her. "Where do you live, out in the wild?" he asked. "Do you live in raising pens, like us?"

She looked at him as if she had never seen him before. "No, we live in warrens in the forest, that the schicks can't follow us down. They send their dogs in after us, though. We kill them and eat them!"

He was shocked. "You kill the schick's dogs?"

She repeated his words searingly. "*The schick's dogs, the schicks' dogs!* They were *our* dogs once! The schicks took them off us! They came down from the sky and took our whole world off us! But that was a long time ago and you don't know anything about it, I suppose, do you? *You* don't even know you were fathered!"

Why did she speak to him so contemptuously? *He* ought to feel sorry for *her*. He found her repulsive but pitiful. She was dirty. She was unattractively lean, with no fat on her at all, as if she had never known a restful moment in her whole miserable life. She had probably had to fight for every scrap of food since she was a chick, instead of being fed in the trough three times a day like him.

Wild homs had bred from domie homs who had escaped or been released accidentally from raising pens. They were unnatural. Vermin. The cock looked her up and down sidelong. Even her buttocks were smooth and muscled. Her breasts were pert, tight, and didn't wobble at all when she moved. She looked as though she would have to be cooked slowly for hours just to be made palatable. While he was thinking this she turned to the back of her cage. She was tugging again and again at one of the bars. He noticed that it had loosened slightly. She could jig it up and down, as though trying to work it free.

She whirled round again. A hen schick was peering in at her. She was slimmer than most who called by, and

looked a little younger. A straggly comb fell limply across a flat pate. Her violet-tinted eyes held a mad look. The wild hom began spitting and growling, grimacing and making clawing motions with her hands. Blinking coldly, the schick continued to appraise her. The stallholder clacked briefly. Stating the price, perhaps.

Then the schick turned away and passed on.

The wild hen hom subsided, panting, her face white.

"You were scared then!" the cock crowed triumphantly. "You were really scared!"

He recoiled at the look she gave him. "And you're not, I suppose? You were too terrified even to speak just now." She gestured all around her. "Like the rest of these lily-livered schicks' dinners!"

The cock glanced around him. In those cages which were still occupied, homs cowered, looking blankly through the bars or else hiding their faces in their hands. No one appeared to be listening to their conversation.

"How would you liked to be killed?" he asked her. "I'd like to have my head cut off."

It was a topic of conversation on the farm. "Oh," he added apologetically, seeing her indignation. "You probably don't want to be killed at all. *You* won't go to paradise."

"*Paradise!*" she spluttered. "*Paradise!* There is no paradise, you stupid, palpitating fool! It's a tale you console yourselves with to make it all bearable! Or one the schick farmers have told you! *This* life is all there is. When you're dead you're dead, dead, dead!"

He didn't want to talk to her any more. He turned his head away, ignoring her continued shouts of "Hey, you! Domie!" He watched homs taken from their cages, trussed up with tape, and placed in baskets to be carried to schick kitchens. He watched them dunked screaming into the seething oil.

A joyful feeling of hope began to mount in him. He hadn't been sold. There was only a little time to go. Perhaps he would live until next day.

Perhaps he would eat again.

The wild hen had at last succeeded in pulling a slat away from the back of her cage – he wouldn't have guessed that was possible – but the gap was too narrow for her to squeeze through. She was working on an adjacent one when the stallholder pulled down a shutter, cutting off the view of the market place and casting the battery in gloom. Then he and his assistant lifted down the cages one by one, opening the occupied ones and tipping the homs into the pen at the rear of the stall.

In the morning the pen would fill up with fresh produce. For the moment it held less than a dozen traumatized homs who huddled on the ground just as they had in their cages, waiting for hom-food in the form of shaped pellets to be poured into the trough fixed to the fence, and stirring themselves only to drink from the container of dirty water in the centre of the small compound.

The unsold cock was squatting silently like the others when the wild hen came up to him and slapped him hard in the face.

"Wake up, domie! You're going to help me."

He nursed his cheek and whined. "Lea' me alone."

Then her foot was in his chest, pushing him on his back. In a moment she was on top of him, holding him down. He yelped as her teeth nipped his neck in warning. She grimaced. "I said I'd bite your throat out. I will, too, right now, unless you do what I say."

A smell came from her. A mixture of stale sweat and a mouldy, soil-like odour, a bit like the odour of the clay floor of the raising pen he had known all his life when the sun was hot. He whimpered and nodded.

"All right."

"Get to your feet."

He stood up. At that moment the stallholder loomed over the holding pen and poured pellets from a sack into a chute. The pellets poured down into the trough along a pipe projecting through the fence. Homs scrabbled towards it.

"Come on, let's get something to eat," the hen said. He followed her to the trough. She made a face when she tasted the hom-food, but she chewed on the pellets and swallowed.

"Not as good as a rabbit," she declared. "Is this what you live on? You poor jerks."

The schick stallholder was gone. The wild hen began looking intently all around her. The cock by her side did not know it, having been a prisoner from birth, but she was assessing the strength of the pen. It was sturdy, with a mesh covering so that one could not climb out. The surrounding fences were mesh too, fastened to broad corner posts. Big staples fixed it to the ground. She was trying to estimate whether she and her unwilling helper could pull up one of those staples during the night, but in addition the mesh fence appeared to be buried in the ground. They might not be able to lift or roll it up and crawl under.

The weakest point, she concluded, was the hole where the food was poured through. The pipe was far too narrow to crawl up, but maybe it could be dislodged and the hole widened...

The homs gorged themselves and then lay down. The schick did not return. Did the traders stay by their stalls when business finished for the day, or did they go somewhere else? The wild hen waited for a while, then, signalling the cock to follow her, climbed on to the trough.

"Grab it here. Pull!"

She wrenched the pipe with all her strength. The domie was next to useless. He seemed not to understand her instructions. He had never done any useful work before. She had to shout at him continually to get him to add his muscle power – feeble though it was – to hers. But together they wrested the pipe to and fro. It came away easily from the trough, but it was part of the chute, which was fixed somehow, though not all that strongly. She carried on shouting at the domie. They moved the pipe to and fro, gradually tearing the chute free of its moorings.

Darkness fell, leaving but little light in the pen. The domie saw this as a release from his task and descended from the trough to lie down and sleep with the others, who had taken practically no notice of his activity with the wild hen. She clambered down, seized his hair and raised his head from the dirt.

"You want to die now?"

Blankly he shook his head.

"All right. Get back up there."

Pushing out a disgruntled lower lip, he obeyed. An unmeasured time passed, perhaps an hour. The wire mesh was slowly being bent back on either side. The hole was bigger now. The hen stopped and got down from the trough, beckoning to her helper.

"Do this!"

She pulled on the pipe, dragging the neck of the funnel into the widened hole, then got him to assist her in a to-and-fro motion, yanking with all her strength.

After a while, with a final jerk, the mouth of the funnel came clean through the hole. They staggered back. The assembly clattered to the floor of the pen.

"Done it!" she grinned.

She leaped to balance on the lip of the trough, examining the damaged mesh, bending it back with her hands as much as she could. The domie was fascinated to see how lithely she then sinuated through the hole head-first, levering herself with her arms. In moments she was standing on the outside, looking exultantly within.

"Come on!" she ordered, gesturing. "Climb through!"

He stood gaping at her open-mouthed.

She pressed herself against the mesh. "Come on, you mutt! Tomorrow you get cooked alive."

When he still didn't move she turned away with a look of disgust. That made the cock stir as if in a dream. He stood on the trough and tried to get himself through the hole. There was barely room for his shoulders to pass. She reached up to grab him by the head and pulled. The edges of the mesh bit into his skin.

"Ow-ow-ow!" he protested. "It cuts!"

Spitting words he couldn't understand, she pulled harder. The mesh scored and ripped him. Soon he was standing beside her, blood oozing from a dozen long scratches.

"That hurt!"

Putting a finger to her mouth warningly, she led him round the pen. They were able to make their way through a passage along the side of the stall and into the deserted market concourse, visible by faint reflected light from some unseen source. It was an eerie feeling to be so unrestrained and moving with freedom among schick constructions. At the nearer end of the concourse stood an arch with an open space beyond it. He followed the wild hen as she made for it, keeping to the shadows. Once they reached the arch, the domie stared and blinked, unable to understand what he saw: a long, broad street, schick buildings rearing towards the sky, an intersection in the distance, and everything lit by overhead street lights. It was all so strange and unfamiliar, all so different from the raising pens which were the world he knew.

The wild hen was staring at the scene too. He assumed it was just as strange to her, but she seemed less bewildered by it. She pressed him back behind the pillar of the arch. "Schicks," she whispered. There were numbers of them strutting along the street in both directions. "We've got to get away from here."

"Will you take me back to my farm?" he pleaded. "I'll be all right there."

She looked into his face incredulously in the lamplight. "All right?" she echoed. "You've been raised as food!"

"I'm getting past eating age. I'm stringy. They might not send me to market again."

The hen laughed unpleasantly. "Then you'll end up in the farmer's pot. Or be fed alive to his dogs!"

She returned to surveying the street. After some moments she pointed. "See that? It looks like a burrow. Too narrow for schicks to go down. Anyway we wouldn't be seen down there."

She was pointing to a slot-like opening in the roadway, quite near to the edge. "We're only the size of rabbits to them," she said. "If we're quick we could get to it without being spotted. Wait till this schick goes by."

A waddling figure passed the arch, comb waving with the characteristic gait. "Now!"

Head down, she ran, not looking to see if he followed. He joined her at the slot, terrified. She was looking down into it. There was a bottom to it, what seemed to be a tunnel with a runnel of flowing water.

"Quick."

She lowered herself into the aperture, hung on the lip by her hands for a moment, then let go. The drop was more than twice her height. She landed like a spring, jumping upright almost immediately, and looked up.

"Hurry up! Come on!"

Awkward and shaking, the domie got into the slot. At first he supported himself hands down on the lip, then afraid a schick would see him, let his head sink below the level of the street. But he couldn't bring himself to let go.

"Come on! Drop! I'll catch you!"

He couldn't hold on much longer in any case. His fingers slipped off the edge. But instead of catching him, the hen stepped back with a giggle. He fell on hard, damp stone, bruised and moaning.

The tunnel which stretched away in either direction was circular in cross-section and visible by the dim light filtering from intermittent slots similar to the one they had come down. It was more than large enough to stand in. A long-tailed rat scuttled past. A nasty acid smell filled the air, coming from the stream which flowed along the tunnel's bottom and carrying big lumps of dark soil-like matter. The hen nodded to a lump as it floated past.

"That's schick shit," she told him. "This burrow will empty it into the river. That's what the schicks do with it."

She looked to left and right, trying to pick a direction, then shrugged and went to the left, walking on one side of the curved tunnel and trying to avoid the foul flow.

They had gone some way and passed several overhead slots when she stopped and listened intently.

Barking noises were echoing from the distance.

"Wild dogs. They probably live down here. Living on the rats."

Suddenly water came pouring down the slot they had just passed. A rumble came from overhead. It was a rain-storm.

The downpour lasted for some time. The level of water in the tunnel rose, so that they could no longer avoid it. Then they came to a place where the tunnel divided in

two. The hen stopped, confused.

"We might be going the wrong way."

They heard a splashing sound. Something was coming along the leftward of the two tunnels ahead. The hen pulled the domie into the other tunnel and pressed herself against the side, signing him to do the same.

By the fuscous light they saw the creature pass. It was larger than they were. It had a long, toothed beak, a comb which ran down a muscled neck, and two large scrabbling feet. Luckily it hadn't detected them. It could have chewed them to pieces in seconds.

The hen spoke in a quiet voice. "Animals such as dogs, foxes, rabbits and rats were here on Earth before the schicks came. Other animals are from the schicks' world, like that one. It must live down here too. Probably eats the dogs!"

She shivered. "I don't like it here any more. We'll get killed. But how do we get out? The holes are too high to reach."

The rain had stopped and the water was no longer rising. They waded on through the right-hand tunnel. Then the cock stopped and called the wild hen back.

"What's that?"

He stood under an overhead slot. Stars showed through it. And something dangled down from it, looking like a long straggle of hair.

She took hold of the thing and gave it a tug. It held. She smiled.

"Well done, domie! You've noticed something at last! Homs have been down here. This is a rope, made from plaited vine creeper. Let's get out."

She braced her legs against the side of the culvert and swiftly climbed the "rope," then called softly to him from above.

But she had to descend again and first show him how, and then even help him, to use the creeper to get up.

They stood on a roadway, not as broad as before. They seemed to have left the town behind. The starlight showed countryside, but also some buildings humped against the stars.

"A farm," the hen murmured. "Let's get going."

She ran on the grass at the side of the road, her glance darting this way and that, beckoning carelessly for the domie to follow. Helplessly, he did so. Then they heard a soft singing sound. The hen slowed. They were near one of the schick buildings. The domie caught up with her as she came to a clump of trees. He was at her shoulder when she peered between boles.

A strange sight met their eyes. The trees might have been planted on purpose so as to form a grove or circle, a play-circle perhaps, for the creature dancing within it. It was a schick, but not much bigger than a hom, with a firm, young-looking crest... The schick was gyrating with apparent pleasure, warbling musically, head swaying rhapsodically from side to side. Its visage, with its open beak and staring eyes, looked comical. Obviously it was unaware anyone was watching.

"It's a schick chick," the wild hen whispered. "Only a few years from the egg. A girl-chick – I can tell from the

comb. *Wait here.*"

She eased herself round the trunk of the tree, crouched, then sprang.

The schick was bowled over by the rush. Briefly there was a frantic clucking and cawing, then the chick's voice was silenced. Feathered arms and legs fluttered and jerked. The hom hen was crouched over the creature, her teeth at its throat. As the domie slowly entered the grove she raised her face over the twitching corpse. She wore an expression of ecstasy, her lips drawn back, her eyes glistening. She was breathing heavily. Blood was on her mouth, dark and colourless in the starlight.

"I've done it," she cried hoarsely. "I've killed a schick!"

She jumped up and pushed him back beyond the trees. "Run. As fast as you can."

He was out of breath long before she was. But she didn't desert him. She stopped to let him gasp and wheeze until he could recover. The schick farm was behind them. Ahead were night and open countryside. She pointed ahead. A mass of trees stood on a hillside.

"That's a wood. We have our warrens in woods. The schicks can't get between the trees!"

She added, "I don't know where we are. My warren's on the other side of the town, I think. Maybe there's another one in there we can join. If not, we'll dig our own burrow!"

She came close to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm Rebecca."

"Rebecca?" he repeated, not knowing the word. "I thought you were a wild hen."

A souging sound came to him. It was the wind ruffling the branches of the trees on the hillside, the same damp wind that moved all across the darkened terrain, agitating it into furtive activity. The frightening and threatening alienness of the landscape made him first whimper, then blubber. He stepped away from the wild hom, his shoulders shaking.

Every last hint of sympathy left her voice as she responded. "What the Great Forest's the matter with you? *This is life* – life you have to struggle for, day by day. Every day is a fight to *stay alive!* You want to go back to the farm? Where the schicks decide when you die? Where you're half dead anyway?"

She took him by the hand. "Come on. Let's see what's in that wood. Behave yourself and I'll tell you what fuckin' has to do with new-born chicks."

Though he did not know why, his tears dried. His shoulders straightened. Uncomprehendingly, he allowed her to lead him towards the thrashing trees.

Barrington J. Bayley's previous stories in *Interzone* include "A Crab Must Try" (issue 103), "The Crear" (issue 110), "Planet of the Stercorasaurs" (issue 158), "The Worms of Hess" (issue 160) – which won our last year's popularity poll – and "The Revolt of the Mobiles" (issue 161). He lives in Donnington, near Telford, Shropshire. For more information on his long career as one of Britain's quirkiest sf writers see the "Astounding Worlds of Barrington Bayley" website, maintained by Juha Lindroos: <http://oivas.com/bjb/>

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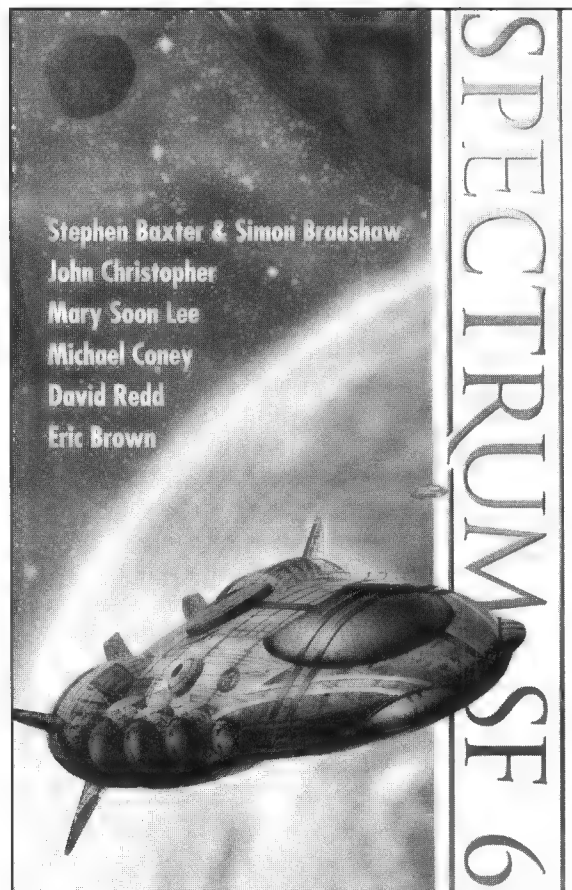
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A Cold Dish

Lisa Tuttle

Throughout my pregnancy I was haunted by an ancient story.

Not so much a story, really, as a scene: the horrific climax to a dark drama of betrayal and revenge. There are only two people in the scene, a man and a woman. They are, or have been, married, and the woman has had two sons by him. Once she loved the man, but now her love has turned to hate. He knows, but is indifferent to her feelings, because he is a powerful and important figure, a force in the land, and she is a mere woman, powerless.

The setting is her house, in her kitchen. Although he has left her, abandoned her for another woman, he has returned to reclaim his sons. They are his heirs, after all; this was in the olden days when children were the property of their father, and women merely conveniences for their begetting.

With typical male vanity, he's not surprised that she is prepared to entertain him, has even cooked a meal for the man who, having ruined her life, has now come to take her children away. Accepting it all as his due, he sits and allows her to serve him. He eats heartily, never wondering why she doesn't join him in the feast.

Finally, replete, he asks for his sons.

She, laughing horribly, tells him he's just had them.

What is this story? Who is she? Who is he? Without names, I couldn't research it, I had no idea where to begin. I looked through books of ancient myths, and Greek tragedies, but could never find it. But I must have read it somewhere, or seen it staged...

"People don't do such things." That's from a more modern play – Ibsen, is it, or Strindberg? Anyway, that's how I feel. Yet even if it never really happened, someone wrote it, someone thought it up, and found it plausible. Women have killed their own children, I know, but... Men are the ones who made parenthood be all about ownership, inheritance and staking a claim, giving a name or not, as if love were dependent on genes, or law. It's men, not women, who have always had the option of denying their bastards. It's women who adopt, or even steal babies, just to have someone to love. And it's men who want to

believe that they're more important than the children they sire, that a woman spurned would butcher her own children just to spite the man who left her.

Yet what do I know, really, about what people will do *in extremis*?

And what if the story I think I remember is something I made up myself?

Carmen was reassuring. Strange dreams, violent fantasies, are not so unusual. They don't mean I'm an awful person. I certainly don't have to act on my fantasies. That I fear I might... well, it's not surprising if I seem a stranger to myself, if my mind works differently these days: pregnancy is an altered state.

Carmen started out as my guilt-counsellor but she's become my friend. She was supposed to help me come to terms with my own accountability, to break down the "criminal mind-set" which had put me on the wrong path, and help me with "reintegration" into society. Over the months she's become more of a general advisor, and a good friend. Maybe the only friend I've got, after all that happened.

I did feel guilty when we first got caught; so did Josh. Actually, we felt guilty even before that, fearful of being caught – office affairs are always a bad idea, but sometimes they're irresistible.

I should have resisted, I know that. We both knew about the legislation specifically outlawing sexual activity on federal property between federal employees. To make matters worse, we weren't equals: I was his boss.

But it wasn't sexual harassment! It wasn't like that between us. I didn't force him into anything. Everything he said in court was a ruse designed by his lawyer to get him a lighter sentence. It worked, too. He was so convincing even I wondered: was I really a heartless, predatory she-devil who had intimidated poor young Josh into providing sexual gratification?

I know lawyers will say anything. My own lawyer wanted to accuse Josh of rape, but I kept her reined in. I wasn't prepared to do that to him – and, anyway, she admitted that if we weren't believed, it could backfire

really badly. I thought I had less to lose than Josh: no partner, money in the bank... I'd lost my job, of course – we both had – but I figured I'd move into the private sector once the uproar died down.

I knew I'd done wrong, and I accepted that I would be punished. I thought losing my job was punishment enough. When I admitted my guilt, I didn't realize it would go to court.

Legal bills ate up my savings in no time. I didn't know how I'd manage to pay the fine. I didn't know the judge had worse than a fine up his sleeve.

Judge Arnold Jason. A handsome, vigorous man, undeniably attractive. He was married, but I'd bet there were affairs. Maybe not actually in chambers, and maybe not with anyone who worked for him, but a man like that would find plenty of opportunities, have plenty of offers... I'd be astonished if he turned them all down. And I thought it might have made him a little more sympathetic to people like me and Josh.

But he lectured us like some Old Testament prophet, like some patriarch bearing the word of God down to the miserable sinners... Yes, he used the word "sin," without irony. We had sinned against society, and we must make amends.

When he first said the words "community service" I relaxed a little. It wasn't going to be jail or bankruptcy. I imagined myself working with the handicapped or the very old; maybe cleaning out bedpans – well, somebody had to do it. It was honest work, and I swore to myself I would not complain.

With his faintly lecherous smile, Judge Arnold Jason said that the punishment should fit the crime. Back in the good old days, he went on – as if he were old enough to remember! – immoral sex had *consequences*. Women kept themselves in check from fear of getting pregnant. Society had gone to hell when contraception had become readily available to anyone who wanted it.

The last election had shown that the great American public was sick of immorality. Many laws had recently been passed to define and ban unacceptable activities. Deviant behaviour was to be discouraged – so the great Judge Jason decided to make an example of me.

I wasn't the first woman to receive a sentence of pregnancy, but the ones before me had all been prostitutes. As an alternative to time in jail, with the added bonus of a year's free health care, as far as most law-abiding, tax-paying citizens were concerned, such "punishment" was more like a holiday! And it had the longer-lasting effect of helping to reintegrate these "fallen women" into normal society. Although most of them gave the babies up for adoption, a few opted for motherhood, and the new responsibility kept them on the straight and narrow – at least, that's what I read in an article which presented this enlightened new approach to vice in a wholly approving way. It seemed, when I read about it, like a great compromise between punishment and rehabilitation.

Somehow it seemed very different when I was on the receiving end.

Compromise! We're all suckers for it. The ideal of the

magical middle way which is good for everyone.

For so long it seemed there could be no compromise between those who promoted "The Right to Choose" and those who proclaimed an irrefutable "Right to Life." Then cryogenics and medical technology created a compromise. Legislation followed. Conflict was eradicated. No more abortions; women had the right to choose; *and* the right to life was upheld. Instead of "termination" we had "removal." Tiny lives were frozen in stasis until a more willing womb, a welcoming home, could be found for them.

It seemed so simple. Everyone knew there were more people eager to adopt than there were healthy, adoptable newborns – but somehow this demand didn't transfer to all the new unborns. Usually people who were willing and able to hire a surrogate mother wanted a child with some of their own genetic material. Otherwise, they'd shop around for premium eggs and sperm – those who could afford them wanted designer babies, not something removed from careless or immoral women.

Yet homes could always be found for newborn babies. It was a psychological thing. People who wouldn't adopt an unknown embryo responded differently to babies. I was assured of this even before the foetus was implanted in my womb.

"Don't worry that you'll have to keep the baby – there's already a loving home just waiting for the little one to be born," said a bright-eyed, curly-haired social worker. "If it would make you feel better, you can sign the adoption-release papers at any time during your pregnancy. Would you like to do that now?"

But I wasn't willing to do or sign anything which might imply that I accepted what was being done to me. Even though I didn't want a baby, and couldn't see how keeping it could possibly benefit me, I resisted, almost instinctively.

I felt sometimes like a rat in a cage, but I was a clever rat. My mind never stopped working furiously to find a way out. And if I couldn't get myself out, then – clever, nasty rat that I was – I would make someone else suffer.

Not just anyone, though. I wanted revenge. Revenge would be my solace. I was going to get the people who had done this to me. Josh? No. He'd been hurt enough. My poor Abelard. He was a coward, that was all, desperate to save his own skin. I'd loved him once, and couldn't forget that.

But I'd like the chance to do something to his lawyer. And the prudish gossip who'd turned us in. And my useless lawyer, who had let this happen. And the judge. Yes, above all, Judge Arnold Jason was the one I really wanted to see suffer. I had lots of cruel and childish fantasies about what I'd do to him if I ever got the chance...

I knew it was unlikely. I knew my fantasies of revenge would have to stay just that, fantasies. And even they started to fade, as my pregnancy progressed, under the softening effects of hormones and – might as well give her the benefit of the doubt – Carmen's professional counselling skills.

New fantasies crept in and took their place. Daydreams about motherhood. The baby, instead of an

unknown “unborn” became, in my dreams, Josh’s son or daughter. Although we couldn’t be together, I would always have his baby...

Sometimes I horrified myself.

And yet, on the other hand, why shouldn’t I have a child – this child? So what if I hadn’t chosen it – the idea of choice was such a modern thing; maternal instinct (if that’s what I was feeling) was far more primitive. This baby was inside me, and that made it mine. I began to hate the idea of losing it. The thought of handing my baby over to strangers came to seem more of a punishment than even the pregnancy itself. Like it or not, I was becoming a mother.

If I was going to do this, I knew I had to go in with my eyes open. My new job – entry-level data-processing, if you please! – left me with too much time to fantasize. I decided to put that time to better use. I set out to research my baby’s background. I promised myself that if the baby inside me had come from someone too obviously horrible and unfit, I would give it up, rather than raise a ticking genetic time-bomb.

I was sure that background details of the heritage of all the unborn must be kept on file somewhere. Their mothers at least would be identified, in case they wanted to return to reclaim their unborn babies when their situations improved (this did sometimes happen).

Of course, I had no right to any of this information. It could only be accessed illegally.

It’s just not true that punishment is a deterrent to further crime. All my previous experience of the law did was make me much more careful not to be caught this time.

It didn’t take me long to find the name of my baby’s genetic mother. She was called Chelsea Mott. No information on the father.

I ran a search on the name Chelsea Mott. I was astonished at the number of links that came up, but even more astonished by the connections they made.

I sat and stared at my computer screen, feeling as if all the breath in my body had gone sighing out.

Chelsea Mott was a law student. Two years ago she had worked as a summer intern for Judge Arnold Jason. She’d worked for him from June through August. In October she’d gone in for a pregnancy removal. Significantly, although she was at law school in another state, she’d come back *here* – the home State of Judge Arnold Jason – for the removal.

My revenge had just been handed me on a plate.

When I arrived at the hospital, in the early stages of labour, a lawyer was waiting with papers for me to sign.

Carmen – I’d asked her to come along as my duala, to help me through the pain, and to run interference – told her to get lost.

“It’s only to make things easier,” the lawyer explained with a kindly smile. “So they can take the baby away as soon as –”

“Nobody’s taking my baby,” I objected. “I’m keeping her – or him.”

“But you can’t! It’s all arranged – the parents are here.”

Someone at the hospital must have called them as

soon as I’d phoned to say I was on my way. Before I could respond, another contraction made me gasp and double over.

“Get out,” Carmen told the lawyer. “Or I’ll have somebody throw you out.”

“I’ll be back,” the lawyer promised.

And, of course, she was. But she couldn’t make me sign her papers – nobody could. And without my agreement, no one could adopt my baby. I had given birth to him, and he was mine, according to both natural justice and the law. At least he was more mine than anyone else’s besides Chelsea Mott, and it wasn’t Ms Mott who was trying to take him away from me.

Carmen saw Judge Arnold Jason and his wife conferring with the lawyer on the very steps of the hospital. That was the deciding moment for her. Up until then, I think she’d thought I was paranoid about Judge Jason, and that it was my “criminal mind-set” keeping me from accepting the fairness of the punishment he’d disinterestedly inflicted.

But if he wanted the baby I carried, how disinterested could he be?

Most women go home with their babies within 24 hours of giving birth, if there are no complications. In my case, the hospital wasn’t willing to let my baby go. I knew there must be pressure on them from behind the scenes, because there was absolutely nothing wrong with him. They were eager enough for *me* to get out; but I wouldn’t let them separate me from my baby. I could see perfectly well that possession, which had worked in my favour until now, could be made to work for someone else.

These early days were crucial, especially if the adoptive parents wanted their name on the birth certificate.

I toyed with the lawyer, who was eager to believe I could be bought. When I told her that I wanted to meet the potential adoptive parents first, before I made up my mind, we both knew her protest was just for show.

He wouldn’t come, and *she* didn’t want me to know her name. But I knew. Mrs Judge was not a publicity hound, but there were photos of her to be found on the web, anyway: on her husband’s arm at a charity ball, or snapped, face bleached and startled by the flash-bulb, in a restaurant. In life, she looked older than I’d expected, maybe because her husband looked so young.

“Did you want to ask me questions?” she asked, getting straight down to business as she came in. “We’ll give the baby a good home, a wonderful life, so much love...” she darted a longing glance at my little baby – still unnamed, except in my head – in his clear plastic hospital bed.

“Why do you want *this* baby?” I asked.

She looked startled by my question, but her halting reply seemed utterly innocent. This was the baby they’d been told they could have, that was all. And they’d been waiting for months, ever since they’d been told... It was just too hard to be let down now.

“So there’s nothing special about *my* baby?”

“Well, all babies are special.” She stared at him so hungrily... Did she know or not? I couldn’t tell.

“Get yourself another baby, then,” I said. When she

looked at me I went on, "You don't have to wait for some poor sucker like me to mess up. I'm sure you've got plenty of money. Go hire somebody to carry one of the unborn for you. Plenty of women would do it if the price was right. Draw up a contract right at the start, everything spelled out, nice and legal, with most of the money to come on delivery, and then you won't get let down."

Her expression changed. "Oh, I see."

"What do you see?"

"The dollar signs in your eyes. Don't you know that buying and selling babies is *illegal*?"

I almost laughed. "Yeah, right. But *forcing* somebody to have a baby and then taking it away from her is perfectly OK. Just as long as you've got the law on your side." I shook my head. "It's a false economy, Mrs Jason. You and your husband should have hired a surrogate mother, instead of trying to get it for free."

She backed away from me, towards the door. "It's a lost cause, trying to help people like you," she said, icily furious. "We would have given that little boy a good home, and you could have gotten on with your life. But you had to ruin it for everyone. Well, enjoy your motherhood."

"I won't blame *you* if I don't," I promised her.

Twenty minutes later, my baby and I were home.

That might have been the end of the story – or the beginning, anyway, of a different one – if the Judge had let go.

If simple adoption had been their aim, they should have looked elsewhere. Taken my advice and hired a surrogate, or just waited until another newborn needed the home they could provide. I don't know if his wife knew the truth or not, but the Judge wanted his own son, and he wouldn't accept that his clever plan had failed.

I don't deny what I did. I know I have to take responsibility for that.

All the same, it wouldn't have happened if Judge Arnold Jason had just let us go. Had let me win. Hadn't been so determined to claim ownership of the child he'd forced me to bear.

A strange shadow-dance began. He sent his representatives to meet with me – meetings which he could later claim had never happened. We had unofficial discussions about hypothetical funding for work which I might do. To buy a human being is against the law. But gifts are not illegal, nor are loans. I could start my own business. Money need not be a problem, but it would be difficult for a single mother to devote enough time to this job or that... If I felt I would be better off without this child – which, after all, was not really, not biologically or genetically, mine – a good home could be found for it.

I never intended to say yes. But I didn't say no. Out of perversity or curiosity, I let them continue. Finally, when pushed to make a decision, to name my price (as it were), I said that I would need to meet with my child's father face to face. Alone, on my own ground. I would hand him over personally, or not at all.

What sort of vanity made him agree, I wonder?

The same, I suppose, which had driven him all along, making him think he was so much better than me, that he could use me, and ruin my life, and profit by it.

He came to my apartment for dinner.

I had the big pot simmering on the stove-top when he arrived. A rich, spicy, meaty aroma filled the air. Music was playing from the classical station – some opera; a wronged woman warbling away in the background. I poured him a glass of wine, red as blood.

Although he'd arrived looking wary, expecting hostility, he soon relaxed under the influence of the wine, the atmosphere, my own, slightly hectic, sexiness. My breasts were much bigger than they'd been when he saw me in court, and I was wearing an abbreviated top to show them off. He found it easier to look at them than at my face. The baby was nowhere to be seen or heard, but he never asked.

"Dinner's ready," I said, and sat him down at the table. I leaned over him – giving him a good look – and ladled the ragout into his bowl.

"What is it?" he asked, frowning down at the little bones, the odd-shaped chunks of meat floating in the thick red sauce with tiny onions, potatoes and carrots.

"My own recipe," I told him. "Try it!" I pressed my breasts against his back before moving away. "Tell me what you think."

He took a bite, chewed thoughtfully, and nodded as he swallowed. "It's good!"

"I'm glad you like it." I leaned against the wall and watched him.

He paused, mid-chew, to give me a puzzled look. "Aren't you eating?"

"Oh, in a minute. I want to finish my wine."

"Well, you'd better hurry up, before I eat it all!" When he grinned, I could see a piece of meat stuck between his front teeth. It made me feel quite ill.

"What's wrong?" He made as if to get up from the table.

"Nothing. I forgot the bread." I hurried over to the oven and took out the rolls I'd been warming, put them in a basket and brought them to the table. By then, I was able to smile again.

"Sit down, you're making me nervous, hanging around like a servant or something."

"Isn't that what I am to you?"

Something of my true feeling must have cut through his self-absorption. He spoke carefully. "No, not at all."

"I've done you a service – but of course, I've never been paid for it," I pointed out.

His eyes cut around the room at the mention of payment. I knew he would be thinking the place was bugged, that I'd brought him here to trap him, convict him out of his own mouth.

"Oh, never mind," I said, and sat down.

"Have some of this... what is it, exactly?" He gestured at the pot in the centre of the table.

"Ragout," I said. "A fancy word for stew."

From the radio, the singers were reaching some sort of climax.

"You're not eating?" Now, too late, he was suspicious.

I smiled and shook my head. "I'm on a diet. Have to lose some of that weight I gained while I was pregnant, or no man will ever want me."

He pushed his plate roughly aside. "What is this? If

you've poisoned me, I'll – ”

“Don't be ridiculous.”

But the fear had infected him; the wrongness of this whole set-up had finally penetrated. He stood up. “I'll put you away forever, I swear! Where's my son? I'm taking him now.”

I began to laugh. It wasn't funny, but I couldn't help myself. And once I'd started, I couldn't stop.

His eyes got bigger as he stared at me. He took a step towards me, and I thought he was going to hit me. But he didn't.

Instead, he charged away, shouting, “Where is he? Where's my son?”

I heard him in the bedroom, knocking over things. He broke a lamp.

It was a small apartment, with few hiding places. It didn't take him long to figure out that the baby wasn't there. He came back into the living room then, glaring at me.

“What have you done with him?”

I didn't say anything. I just looked at the stew-pot, laughter still welling up, painful now, like hiccoughs.

He turned pale. He made a sort of grunting noise and swayed on his feet. For a minute I thought he would faint. He closed his eyes and shook his head, and then –

Carmen tells me I'm lucky he didn't kill me, knock me out, strangle me – he could have, so easily, and I had no kind of weapon to stop him. But he didn't. I think he was too horrified by what he thought he'd done to think of anything else.

He ran for the door, desperate to escape. I could hear him retching as he hurried away.

As soon as he was gone, I grabbed my coat and the bag I'd packed earlier, and headed for the airport. Carmen was waiting for me there with the baby who was getting fractious, ready for his feed. We caught our plane with minutes to spare, my breasts leaking milk.

“Closure,” I told Carmen as we buckled up. “I did the crime, I served the time, and I got my revenge – and my reward.” Looking down at the little one on my breast, it was hard to imagine that I – or anyone – could ever have thought of him as a punishment. I felt like the hero with the golden fleece or something.

I still don't know what character I was playing at dinner with the Judge, what story we were acting out, but it must be a famous one, since he recognized it. I almost wish I'd asked him.

Lisa Tuttle last appeared in *Interzone* with “Soul Song” (issue 119). Along with Pat Cadigan, she is one of the best-known representatives of the surprisingly large contingent of American women sf-and-fantasy authors who have opted to reside in Britain. A Texan by birth, she has lived for many years in Scotland with her husband and child, and is the author of numerous novels, story-collections and non-fiction books. The above story was first published on the internet at www.scifi.com. This is its first appearance in print.

THE GHOST SISTER

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There I was being a guest at this summer's Finnish national sf convention, puzzling over all the deadly mosquito warnings I'd had. I didn't see one, but many more people than expected travelled to Jyväskylä in central Finland for its arts festival (30,000 attendees mentioned) and associated convention. Thanks to cunning sponsorship deals Finncon admission was free; more than 2,000 fans came and went over the weekend; contrast this year's British Eastercon figure of 814. Guests were Jonathan Carroll, who told horror stories of dealings with Hollywood; free software guru Richard Stallman, who true to his principles refused to autograph anything bearing the evil © sign; performance artist Stelarc, complete with his bionic Third Arm ("It cost \$20,000 to develop") and fearful pictures of himself dangling from impaling hooks; local author Johanna Sinisalo, still ecstatic at winning Finland's major literary prize with an sf novel; and fan guest Ahrvid Engholm, armed with a mosquito repellent so potent and liable to cause skin cancer that it was banned in Sweden. And me, they let me in too. I returned much impressed by Finnish enthusiasm and hospitality – unlimited smoked salmon at the end-of-convention party! – and also by their Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which capriciously paid my way. Other sense-of-wonder moments included finding a net provider called sci.fi and realizing too late that my intention of leaving the pub and going to bed as soon as it got dark was fatally flawed, since in summer this never happened....

THREE WORLDS TO CONQUER

Poul Anderson (1926-2001) died near midnight on 31 July, following a year-long struggle with prostate cancer. He had returned that day after a month in hospital to await the end at home, supported by his wife Karen, daughter Astrid, and close family. It's surely superfluous to list his vast contributions to sf since 1947, marked by seven Hugos for shorter fiction, three Nebulas, SFWA Grand Master status in 1998, and – in the month before his death – the John W. Campbell Memorial Award for his *Genesis* as best sf novel of 2000. Another great loss.

Jeffrey Archer was in the news for (besides the usual reasons) being the proposed captain's name in the coming *Star Trek* prequel series *Enterprise*... since cautiously changed to Captain Jonathan Archer.

Simon R. Green was stirred by my *SFX* column on unwelcome title changes: "My Hawk & Fisher titles were perfectly acceptable to my British publisher, but not to the US. *No Haven*



for the Guilty became *Hawk & Fisher*. Because: it was the first of a series starring Hawk and Fisher. The second H&F book, *Devil Take the Hindmost*, became *Winner Takes All*. Because: the publisher believed most Americans wouldn't know what hindmost meant. Book 4 was *Vengeance for a Lonely Man* in the UK, and *Wolf in the Fold* in the US. Because: the title was too long for the spine. And Book 6, *Two Kings in Haven* in the UK, became *Bones of Haven*. Because... I haven't a clue. Anti-monarchist feelings?"

Diana Wynne Jones is no longer contractually forbidden to announce that her fantasy *Howl's Moving Castle* is being filmed by the Japanese Studio Ghibli, makers of *Laputa* and *Princess Mononoke*.

Kathryn Lindskoog has been at it again. After causing a stink with *The C. S. Lewis Hoax* (1988) and its claim that Lewis acolyte Walter Hooper forged that embarrassing fragment *The Dark Tower*, there's more on the "truly diabolical literary crime" in her *Sleuthing C. S. Lewis: More Light in the Shadowlands*, published this August and arguing that several works attributed to Lewis are "the product of systematic forgery." Oh dear, this may put ideas into the heads of HarperCollinsPublishers...

Mordecai Richler (1931-2001), Canadian novelist who ventured into children's fantasy with *Jacob Two-Two and the Dinosaur* (1987), died of cancer on 3 July.

William Shatner, who reportedly lost some \$10 million in a failed internet company, is now reduced to charging \$75 for autographs – but a 6 July *Guardian* story added that, at least when hurrying to catch a plane at LA International, he can be bargained down to \$50.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Nature Notes. Lucy Sussex reports from Down Under on "a small marsupial called the Dibbler, rare, but saved from extinction. It's about the size of a large mouse with a bushy tail. One wonders if Terry Pratchett should contribute to their survival fund, given CMOT Dibbler in Discworld." However, "Dibblers belong to the antechinus family, which means they are famously sexually rapacious. The fact that at the end of the breeding season no males are left alive caused zoologists no end of puzzlement, until it was discovered that they'd gone without sleep and food in their sexual frenzy. Leaving a population of pregnant females..."

International Horror Guild Awards novel shortlist: *A Shadow on the Wall*, Jonathan Aycliffe; *Silent Children*, Ramsey Campbell; *You Come When I Call You*, Douglas Clegg; *The Bottoms*, Joe R. Lansdale; *Declare*, Tim Powers. IHG Living Legend Award: Alice Cooper (eek!).

From the Spiel Chequer. "When God became displeased by Man he disrupted this perfect climate: that caused the floods and the subsequent shifting of the Teutonic plates which split up the land..." (Andrew Hook, "The Virtual Menagerie," *The Third Alternative* 27, 2001)

Twenty Years Ago. In 1981, Andrei Tarkovsky joined the "it can't be good, it's sf" bandwagon with his remark "I do feel that *Solaris* is the least successful of my films because I was never able to eliminate completely the science-fiction association."

Thog's Masterclass. "Then, mercifully, blackness descended. He was brought out of it when he landed hard on a hard surface on his hands and knees, with which every orifice in his body seemed to explode." (Sam Merwin Jr, *The Time Shifters*, 1971) "Whit slouched in a high-backed shaker chair with a boot on one knee." (Jean Stewart, *Return to Isis*, 1992) *Dept of Eyeballs in the Sky*. "The woman took her eyes from him languorously and placed them, in a delicate fashion, on Mosely." (Jane Jensen, *Sins of the Fathers*, 1997) "Er... hi," Marty managed, wincing his eyes like injured climbers around the dangerous overhang of her torso and up to the relative safety of her face." (James Flint, *The New English Library Book of Internet Stories* ed Maxim Jakubowski, 2000)

FUTURE REMIX

Ian McDonald

interviewed by

Nick Gevers



Photos: Paul Brazier, Mexican 1994 and London June 2001

Ian McDonald, surely one of Britain's most significant science-fiction writers, is both a pyrotechnic stylist and a deeply humane socio-political commentator. His novels and stories are frenetic, colourful, allusive, hilarious; they comprehensively mix and recombine 20th-century history and popular culture with the speculative gists of sf and fantasy, the radical conceptual sleights and off-the-wall dialects of genre fiction. A longtime resident of Northern Ireland, McDonald sees the contemporary world from the margins, from the materially impoverished but always vibrant and adaptable perspective of the teeming populations of the excluded peripheries of the globalized order. He gives the Third World a needed science-fictional voice, but always with brilliant lyrical inventiveness, always with supreme narrative flair.

McDonald's novels, while invariably fresh and distinct, form identifiable thematic clusters. The condition of Ireland is explored in a trio of superficially unrelated books, the magnificent fantasy of archetypes *King of Morning*, *Queen of Day* (1991), the extravagant far-future picaresque *Hearts, Hands, and Voices* (1992, published in the USA as *The Broken Land*), and an incisive near-future police procedural with aliens, *Sacrifice of Fools* (1996). Satire on systems of social repression informs *Out on Blue Six* (1989), a Vonnegutian revolutionary comedy, and *Necroville* (1994, retitled *Terminal Cafe* in the US), a kaleidoscopic vision of a world whose proletariat consists of the resurrected dead. Africa is liberated from its present chaotic dependency by a protean extraterrestrial infestation in *Chaga* (1995, published in America as *Evolution's Shore*), *Kirinya* (1998), and the chapbook novella *Tendeleo's Story* (2000). And there is the transplanted Third World of McDonald's terraformed Mars, the setting for both his esteemed first novel, *Desolation Road* (1988) and his latest book, *Ares Express* (2001).

The richness of these full-length works is on display also in McDonald's many fine short stories, some of which are collected in *Empire Dreams* (1988) and *Speaking in Tongues* (1992); important unassembled tales include "The Best and the Rest of James Joyce" (1992) and "The Days of Solomon Gursky" (1998), a cosmic fol-

low-up to *Necroville*. Indeed, various of McDonald's shorter fictions share and illuminate the locations of his novels; but others are vigorously independent, for example the lyrical cyberpunk novella *Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone* (1994). *Kling Klang Klatch* (1992) is an idiosyncratic graphic novel featuring text by McDonald and artwork by David Lyttleton. McDonald's next novel is to be a huge epic of mid-21st century India, *Cyberabad*.

NG: Your background sounds like an interesting and varied one – longterm residence in Northern Ireland, travels in Third World countries such as Kenya. How has this shaped your sf writing? Would it be fair to describe you as an author dedicated to the evocation and discussion of the plight and potential of ordinary people in "developing" and conflict-ridden regions of the world?

IMD: Little bit of personal history first: I was born in Manchester to a Scottish father and an Irish mother and came over to Northern Ireland when I was five – a place which places a certain importance on "identity." I grew up on the margins of the margins, so it's probably inevitable I'd be attracted to a marginal, outsider's literature. Likewise, I'd naturally identify with the marginalized, those outside the mainstream of Koka Kola Kultur: the developing and the conflict-ridden, as you put it. You write about what you see around you, and

you don't pass the greater portion of your life through the "Troubles" without some identification with similar conflicts in the developing world.

I'd use the expression "Third World" only in the sense that I include Northern Ireland as a Third World country: a society of two significant social groups that have been set against each other by historical engineering; a skewed economic infrastructure based on the public sector, with a highly economically significant samurai elite (the RUC); a highly-politicized population with the ability to arm itself to the teeth if it's disregarded; a post-colonial process of disengagement that failed half-way through; physical marginalization, poor infrastructure, a monied class rapidly moving upwards that is yet unable to engage fully in either Irish or UK society; the sense of cultural inferiority that forces both social groups into re-engineering of their cultural tropes...

This is getting worthy and boring. My point is, there's more dynamic for change in "Third World" societies than in the West. Where there's change, there's conflict and where there's conflict, you have story. I've never been attracted to the "aristocratic" model of science fiction – *wunderkinder*, the dynastic model, the Hidden Prince. It strikes me as a singularly irresponsible way to rule billions of sentients: when the going gets tough, the supreme executive saddles up and heads off into the thick of tough. Like sending Blair to Kosovo at the head of a division of Household Cavalry. (Then again...) This may come from the fact that a lot of science fiction is historical fiction set in the future. Me, I like ordinary people who get catapulted into extraordinary events, like Sweetness in *Ares Express*. Certainly, I'll be exploring "Third World" science fiction for a couple of volumes to come; I like the way that the tropes and assumptions of sf mutate and transform when they hit a totally different society from the one in which they were bred: that's why I mentally subtitle *Cyberabad* – "A Khyberpunk novel."

NG: Another very prominent feature of your writing is your (an inadequate adjective) poetic prose style. How did this style develop? Was it influenced by any modern authors in particular?

IMD: There's a certain "either/or" theory of writing that I've never subscribed to: either you have a good story or you have good characters, either you have a mile-a-second plot, or you have good language. This strikes me as defeatist; surely, the idea is to have both/and/all? I do care about language in a book: that's why I have to plot everything in detail before I actually get down to fingers on keys, otherwise I'll be so preoc-

*"Everything
influences you.
To deny that
is to deny
any attempt
to produce art
at all."*

cupied with what happens and how that I'll forget it's ultimately words on a page, and those might as well be (I hope) well-chosen words. Also, I do come from a different literary environment from the English Bourgeois Dispassionate School: one in which poets are (often over-) esteemed and verbal dexterity – particularly in spoken language – is valued. The mix? It's all mix:

Joyce is in there, of course, the everyday hyperbole of Thomas Kinsella's translation of "The Tain," Blake – as always. A lot of it is just hearing the way sounds bounce off each other in my head, some words resonate better off each other; balancing syllables, stresses in a proper name, all that stuff. You hear magic dialogue and language everywhere; it's just listening. Nowadays, as I read virtually no fiction, I'm more reliant on overhears than ever, otherwise I'd descend into parodies of McDonald style.

NG: It's frequently been commented that you quote and rework texts by other writers in your own fiction – very much a postmodern technique, and one you employ very skilfully, in a sort of transcendent parody. What has motivated this tendency?

IMD: So? Doesn't everyone? The most commonly levelled charge is about the Chaga Saga recapitulating *The Crystal World*. Can't list that sample on the sleeve notes. I've never read Ballard: I've never taken to all that Home Counties pining-for-Empire/degenera-

tion stuff. I've been living in the last days of empire for most of my life, and it gives you quite a different perspective. Historical necessity. There's still a big cultural hangover from the Victorian romantic ideal of artist as quasi-divine creator: a quick, agonized commune with the muse and it all pours out of his head, perfect and complete and new upon the world. This is an historical blip; Classical and Baroque composers quite happily drew (improved) upon themes written by other composers. A screenwriting seminar with a guy whose greatest fear was that someone or something might influence and thus taint his purity of finish with "derivativeness." Nonsense. Everything influences you. To deny that is to deny any attempt to produce art at all. Writing is pure response to the world. Everything is part of the mix. What we call "postmodernism" is simply not an adequate term for what's happening here; for a start, too much of it is self-aware, preening and dishonest. Irony? Get out of here. "Modernism" is just so last-century now. I'd call our developing cultural trend to use the wads of information surrounding us and our access to it, to create micro-cultures, "modern-modernism." It's modern in that it's a product of our technological ability to surf, sample and mix, rather than concentrating on trans-historical sources, as in the academic definition of the term. Anyone with an eye on the zeitgeist would agree that the art of the edit will be the cultural skill of the new century.

NG: How do you conceive and develop your novels and stories? What comes first – the concept, or the style and imagery?

IMD: It is a long slow process. The idea always comes at once: I still drive daily past the traffic lights where *King of Morning*, *Queen of Day* appeared all at once, entire while I was waiting at red. After that, it can take years for the story to grow to the point where it can tell itself. Nothing's clear yet, just an idea and a feeling. It's like a planet forming: narrative gravity attracts ideas, characters, scenes. After the initial "I'd like to write about..." glow, there's usually a moment when characters, story and voice all fall into place simultaneously. By "voice," I mean the way the story's going to tell itself: stylistic conceits, like the idea of Story as story in *Ares Express*, or how the opening of *Chaga* and the closing of *Kirinya* are modelled around John Tavener's *The Protecting Veil* to (hopefully) evoke a transcendent stillness. I'm very much an image-driven writer, I have to be able to see stuff in my inner cinema, and images very much form the seeds of stories: key images for *Cyberabad*

are the high-speed train carrying Mr Nandha the AI assassin across the Indo-Gangetic plain, the rooftop farm, a garland of orange flowers floating on a river, the dry rain clouds in the south and the dog that is beaten to death for defending a guava tree.

NG: Throughout your career, you've produced a steady flow of highly atmospheric short stories, the earlier of which appear in *Empire Dreams* and in *Speaking in Tongues*. Do you have a particular affection for the short form, despite its low rate of pay?

IMD: There are story ideas, and there are novel ideas. Sometimes, as in "King of Morning, Queen of Day" and "Towards Kilimanjaro," the story becomes a novel; then, as in *Tendeleo's Story*, the novel becomes a story again. Everything has its natural length; but I do like a good, tight short story – it was Harlan Ellison's short fiction that really made me want to write. I often use stories as a way of introducing ideas I'm going to explore over a series of works: the Chaga (which began with "Towards Kilimanjaro," a novelette), the Shi'an in the stories ("The Undifferentiated Object of Desire," "Frooks," "Legitimate Targets") and then *Sacrifice of Fools*, the Mars of *Desolation Road* and *Ares Express* (which first saw print in the short story "The Catherine Wheel"). Some ideas have to be approached from several sides. I'm currently feeling my way into what I call Big Future: a fictional setting with the cultural variety and sophistication of Ursula Le Guin's Ekumen but hard science and STL space transport, set ten to one hundred thousand years from

now. And no aliens: the humans are the aliens in this wide, slow, multi-leveled society. It has enough facets to keep me entertained for some time. Low rates of pay be damned – pay is pay, and, to be brutally career-ist about this, it's good to keep your face seen.

NG: Your most recent book is *Ares Express*, a companion volume to your first novel, *Desolation Road*. The terraformed Mars these books share as a setting is a rich locale, one to which you've repeatedly returned. How did you originally contrive it, and what is its continuing appeal for you?

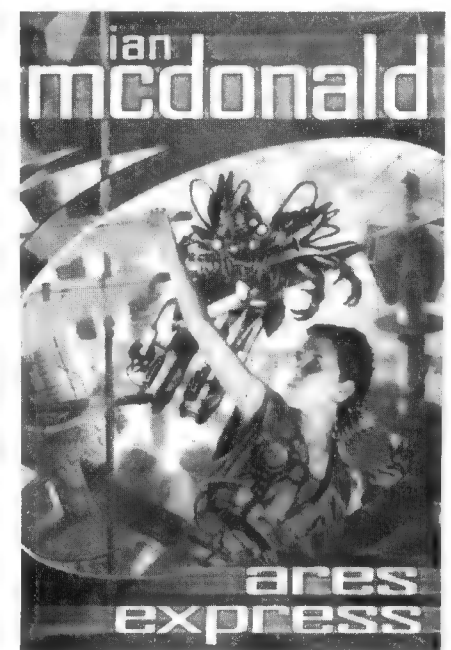
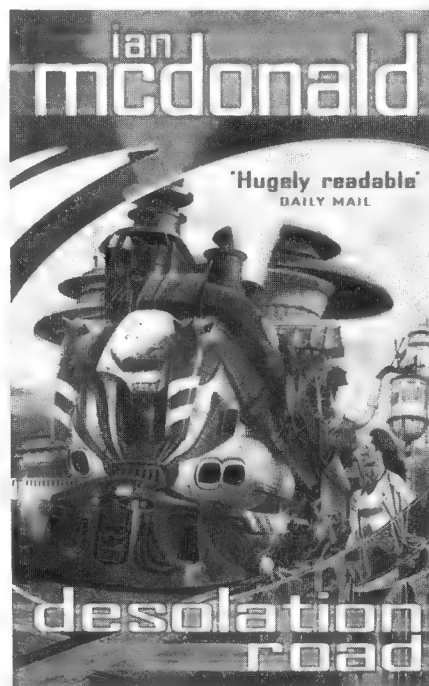
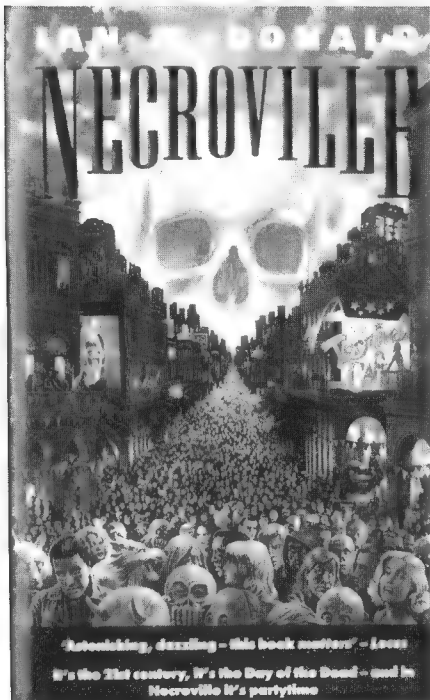
IMD: Of course, Ray Bradbury is in the mix: I remember a single copy of *The Silver Locusts* (that's the UK *Martian Chronicles*) being the only science fiction available on the Liverpool-Belfast boat. Bought it, read it anyway, over a long and very boring night crossing, and it left me with a very strange impression because it was so unlike the kind of sf I was reading at that time, loose structure, episodal, with a huge cast of characters and a non-realistic style and a lingering image of Mars as Zion: the blacks leaving the South is an image that still haunts me. I loved the way Bradbury told a story of a place, and a place for ordinary people. Years later, *Omni* published a story called "Vox Olympica" – it might have been Michael Bishop wrote it but I can't be certain. I can't remember too much about that actual story apart from using the calderas on Olympus Mons as a very large church organ but the setting, a richly terraformed Mars, blew me away. I thought, of course... and then went and found everything I

could at the time (and there was a lot less of it than there is now) on terraforming Mars.

Somewhere back in the mix was Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and the elements fused into the idea of a magic realist science-fiction novel. Critical opinion will doubtless class this an oxymoron, as science fiction is essentially a non-realistic form; I came from the standpoint that science fiction must aspire to realism if it is to achieve sufficient suspension of disbelief, and I wanted to play around with that. It wasn't until I spent some time in Africa in 1984, at the start of the great drought, that the feel of this Mars came together in the now-lost story "Cirrus Minor": I didn't want this Mars to be Bradbury's small-town America in the sky, I was looking for a different paradigm and I still see the *Road* Mars as a combination of India and Australia. By a nice coincidence, I was approached a couple of years back by an Australian production company who had this insane but commendable idea to do *Road* as a TV series – *Northern Exposure* on Mars was the pitch – and they had a creative alliance with a Bangalore-based CGI company, who'd do the big fuck-off engines and all the angelic/miraculous gear. So it started as an Oz/Indian fusion, and may yet end there too. How satisfying.

NG: *Desolation Road* is a highly eventful picaresque novel, with a large cast of characters and a remarkable circular structure. What sort of design have you followed in *Ares Express*? How does the new novel relate to, and depart from, its predecessor?

IMD: *Ares Express* is a companion to



Desolation Road (not a sequel, prequel, any kind of quel), and shares much of the same terrain, attitudes, technology, steam and a couple of characters. The more observant will notice some differences, like the Grand Valley world, which surely would have been noticed in *Desolation Road*. Now, I never actually said it *wasn't* there in *Desolation Road*. A certain amount is authorial frustration at being constrained by history and wanting to bolt new annexes on; most is my exploring the idea of this perhaps being an alternative – the best of all alternatives: one of the slew of possible Marses created by the vinctulum processing computers that crash-terraformed the planet for ROTECH. I've recently done a story for Pete Crowther's anthology on Mars: it has some similarities to the Mars of *Ares Express* and to the early prototype story, "The Catherine Wheel," but from a different angle. I'm moving a little further from base each time: Mars seems to be unfolding into a series of novels, about a series of worlds that are companions to each other. Terraform Mars stories are just so last-century now, so of course it's time for me to go back and have another little look round and see what we've learned; but the particular structure of *Express* is drawn from the train *Catherine of Tharsis* and those who live upon her, so it's direct and straightforward and deliberately brought into the open. It's a story about Story, but in case that makes it sound like one of those deadly Italo Calvino novels about novels, there's a lot of fun going on.

NG: Your second novel, *Out on Blue Six*, was a sort of satirical dystopia, a colourful and noisy book, which some esteem less than your other works. How do you yourself regard it now?

IMD: I can't look at it. Everyone has a bad book in them; in mitigation, I hope I got mine out early. Second Novel Problem. The one thing I like about it is that it has the only character in fiction named after a Scout Hall in Belfast: Courtney Hall.

NG: *King of Morning, Queen of Day*, on the other hand, is widely seen as your masterpiece, both because of the authenticity of its Irish setting and because of its varied content, stylistically very different accounts of the encounters of successive generations of women with the source of all archetypes. What was the intention behind this book?

IMD: It was the first of what I think of as the "Irish Trilogy" and was written out of a pure mean spirit. I'd bought and read R.A. McAvoy's *The Book of*

Kells and was mildly infuriated by the American Oirishness of it all: it was fun but didn't seem to have made much effort, or have much desire, to go into the subtleties and complexities of modern Ireland. Deep in the Celtic Twilight. The idea struck me to do a modern Irish fantasy, to take the Celtic whimsy King of the Faeries thing, look at where it's come from in our century (heavily politically engineered) and where it might be going. All cultures and identities must evolve and change or they die; "Irishness" is no different. Look, I have to fess up to a certain amount of hubris here: I thought "I can do that/I can do that better," banded out the original story and then the thing blew itself up to novel length. It's my quintessential remix novel: each section remixes the one before, the whole is about how each generation remixes the mythology of the one before. Throw in some clever-dick stuff playing around with 20th-century Irish literature, Bob's your Uncle. I mix a sound track to every piece of fiction I write, and this is one of the few I still listen to. The book is firmly planted in 1990, but the CD'll still lift a party...

Of course, this vanity is returning to bite me on the ass, first with the Chaga Saga, more so now with *Cyberabad*. I'm the outsider trying to feel my way into different, complex and subtle cultures. Serves me bloody right, then.

NG: *Hearts, Hands, and Voices*, your far-future biotech novel, reads like a summary or allegory of all the 20th

century's intractable sectarian conflicts. Why is the heroine mute? And is the telepathic communion achieved at novel's end a serious prescription for the resolution of conflict? Ken Livingstone approved, but still...

IMD: *Hearts, Hands, and Voices* – the title's from a splendid old Lutheran Hymn, "Nun Danket Denn Wir Gott." The idea was, of course, to generalise the Irish Problem – by extension, the armed history of the 20th century. Although it's number two of the Irish Trilogy, it's not about Northern Ireland – it's more or less specifically a reworking of the Irish War of Independence.

I still like the biotech – I was feeling my way towards the Chaga Saga here, the whole organic thing that seems to bubble up from some deep brain fold. I have a feeling it's part of this "both/and" attitude I was talking about way up the page. I see the split between biological and mechanical (including electronic) as artificial: our current cultural paradigm is to model life and sentience on a weak simulacrum hooked up through the 19th-century telephone system concept; but machines will – must – become more like biological systems. You don't get round Papa Darwin that easily. Marvin Minsky is dead wrong – and deeply dull – when he mind-masturbates about us all flinging off our shoddy little meat carapaces and taking on superior bodies of metal and silicon. Machines will become more biological: evolution works, in any environment. That Platonic dualism of Minsky's has a long tenure in science fiction: the mortification of the heated flesh, the notion of disembodiment and superintelligence deriving infinite pleasure from Knowing Big Stuff About the All. Julian of Norwich was doing it in her convent cell back in the 12th century. Keep your higher mathematical truths, mate. I'll hold on to the Playstation. Gödel's going to shaft you in the end.

Hearts, Hands, and Voices: Mathembe's not speaking was a simple symbol for the disenfranchisement of the young: speaking of the Northern Ireland situation, what you're offered is a series of off-the-peg attitudes, identities and solutions made up by people with a vested interest in you buying them. Mathembe has no voice; at another level, she knows that if she did speak, no one would listen to her. The ending: I'd forgotten what happened. *HHV's* one of those books, like *Necroville*, I have no memory of writing; if I were to thumb through a copy, there'd be stuff in there that would surprise me. Likewise, some of the earlier stories are receding over the memory horizon; it wasn't until you mentioned it in this interview that I remembered I'd written a story called "The Best and the Rest of James

Joyce"... I do remember the original ending to *HHV* was a lot harder and darker and offered very little hope. I think the best point I can draw from a slightly over-convenient plot resolution is that communication is all we have.

NG: The graphic novel *Kling Klang Klatch* was an intriguing departure in literary form for you, although readily recognizable as your work. Have you conceived any further projects in this vein?

IMD: *Kling Klang Klatch* was one of those offers that come up that are just too much fun to refuse. I've always been a closet comics fan, and I'd seen what was happening in the graphic novel field in the early 1990s, after *Dark Knight* and *Watchmen* wrote the Old and New Testaments for the genre. Poor man's movies. I sent Faith Brooker at Gollancz three ideas, one of which we wanted to do with Bill Sienkiewicz, but he'd vanished to some island in the middle of a lake in Canada, supposedly, communing with something. That story ended up as *Necroville* – the mind boggles what it would have been like as a graphic. David Lyttleton had been scheduled to work with Jonathan Carroll but again, something perhaps not unconnected with a Canadian island happened there, and we ended up with *Kling Klang Klatch*.

It was written in a hurry – with a nasty hiatus in the middle when I got shafted by a certain former agent not altogether unknown to the SFWA – in weekly instalments in screenplay style, which David drew up at white heat; if you look carefully, you can see his style develop as it goes on: halfway

through the book characters lose their arms and legs because David reckoned you didn't actually need a limb to communicate the concept of handness and footness. I'm still immensely fond of it, though I could drive Inspector Morse's Jaguar through the plot frailties. Even now, I can spot a Lyttleton a mile off; when one crops up in *New Scientist* or the *Guardian*, I get a small rush of trainspotterish pleasure. At the time, I was keen to do more in the vein, but the genre's shifted. I was gobsmacked by *From Hell*: the chapter where Dr Gull goes on his tour of Hawksmoor Churches and demonstrates the London Pentagram is exceptional. Docudrama comics strike me as an exciting possibility.

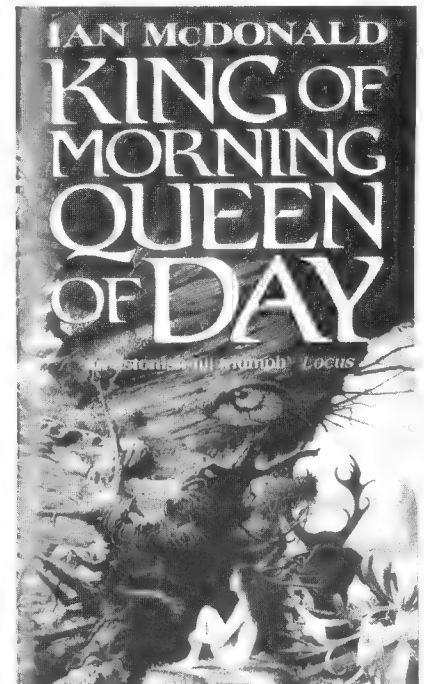
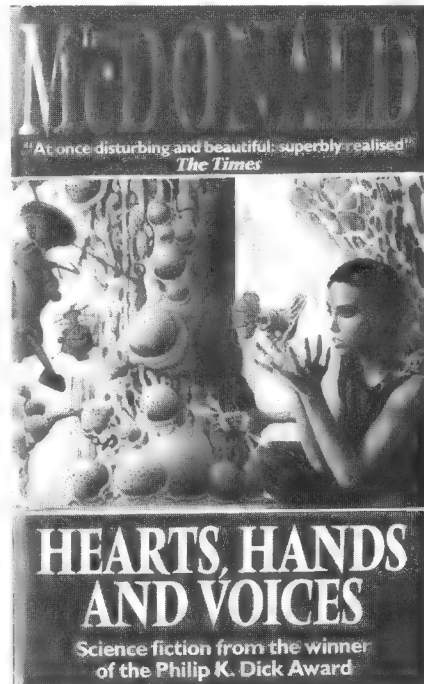
NG: *Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone*, your long novella, like the final section of *King of Morning*, is an exercise in cyberpunk, although by no means just that. In fact, it marries cyberpunk with an extrapolated Kabbalistic mysticism, to quite extravagant effect. Why this particular combination, and in a Japanese locale?

IMD: *Scissors* was something of a bluff: novellas were fashionable at the time and I persuaded Bantam to do *Scissors* as a free-standing book. Looking at the previous answer, I'm coming out of this as a right little fashion tart. Anyway, they liked it, and *Scissors* has had the cheek to go around the world in this format; not the UK for some reason. I used to live across the road from an extravagantly good second-hand bookshop where I got copies of Oliver Statler's *Japanese Inn* and *Japanese Pilgrimage*, which describes the Shikoku pilgrimage with the luminous-

ity and spirituality of a Hokusai print. I liked the idea of writing a spiritually informed cyberpunk novel, and the circular pilgrimage meshed with the thought "Zen and the Art of Mountain Bike Maintenance." I already had the idea of the fracters – the graphic typefaces that can interact directly with the brain – from Neville Brody's book on design and typography. There's a lot more Buddhism in it than Kabbala, Neal Stephenson notwithstanding; I'd quite like to revisit that post-industrial Japan, and Ethan Ring (oh the heavy-handed symbolism) and his ill-starred relationship with Luka Casipriadin. However – I'm depressing myself here – I'm getting to the stage in my life where I'm starting to realize there are things that may just never get written.

NG: *Necroville* deals with the plight of dead people who have been resurrected by means of nanotech only to become a servile underclass. Is this a direct commentary on industrial relations in general?

IMD: *Necroville* as an allegory of labour relations? Hadn't thought of this: Corporate Capitalism Costs You Your Body and Soul. Maybe there is something in this. The whole contratada system at the heart of *Necroville* – the Tesler-Thanos Corporation can bring you back, but you're a long time paying it off – came from the realization that the living would envy the Dead. They look good (they can look anything they want), they never get sick, they live forever. Of course, the vested interests of the living are going to want to put restrictions on that. Dead investments could totally devastate the economic system. Immor-



tality always comes at a price; in *Necroville*, it's fiscal and contractual. It's a long-standing literary convention that because we can't have it, immortality comes at so high a price that no one would want it. Ask Count Dracula.

In "The Days of Solomon Gursky," a novella in *Asimov's*, I developed the idea that in such a society, there will come a point where Dead is the norm and meat life is as restricted as life in the womb. You don't have to go too far into a future like that to reach a world that is almost incomprehensible to us. In the end, "life" abolished altogether. We've reached that meat/machine fusion I was talking about. These future humans, with their ability to reshape physical reality, are effectively colonies of quasi-biological nanocrafters. They can die and be reconstructed any number of times – they use it for space travel in an STL universe – so you have minds that will make it all the way into deep Deep Future.

NG: Your sequence of novels beginning with *Chaga* and continuing with *Kirinya* involves a breathtaking transformation of sub-Saharan Africa into a surreal evolutionary paradise by an alien biological infestation. Africans are at first threatened, but ultimately empowered, by this change. Your ideological agenda seems fairly clear here; but in practical terms, what statement are you making about the future of Africa, and how will *Ananda* (the final volume) carry this manifesto forward?

IMD: The future's coming to Kenya as much as to Kentucky; and to me, it's more interesting in Nairobi than Nashville. Africans are tough and resourceful people. The great skiffy cliché is the UFO/White House combo: what if it's the White Mountain – Kilimanjaro – instead? The image of the unstoppable wave of transformation was nicked from *The Wrath of Khan*: it's the Genesis device, slowed down, and once I had that, it became a rich source of metaphors: for colonialism, new technology, globalization, change, death. If the Chaga is colonialism, it's a unique kind that allows the people of the poor South to use and transform it to meet their needs and empower themselves: it's a symbiosis. The Chaga creates a society which needs nothing from Western Capitalism, in fact, threatens to destabilize it: here material objects are cheap and easy to make. Skills and talents become important. This is a true knowledge economy, where a repro Lexus is worth a haircut, because how many folk do you know can do a really good haircut? So we get a democracy of commodities, and nanoprogramming skills are the economic base. There'd be a lot of copyright fights but the food

would be great.

As I said about *King of Morning*, *Queen of Day*, in the Chaga Saga, I'm an outsider, so the main character, Gaby, has to be an outsider: a journalist who manages to wreck every good thing she touches. She has to find her way into and through levels of very different societies, and her journey has far from ended.

Ananda, the mooted final chunk of the Chaga Saga (or rather the novel-form part of it) has back-burnered, but suffice to say that we'll get Gaby back to Africa from her exile, there'll be a resolution with Shepard, who'll make it back from the BDO, we find out what's on the other side of the last chamber, and Ren gets to grow up a bit. Plus all the usual mayhem, shooting, rough sex, politicking and cosmic stuff. And a lot more football – it was left out a bit in *Kirinya*.

Tendeleo's Story, commissioned by Pete Crowther and published by PS Publishing, and by Gollancz in *Futures* and *Binaries*, and by Gardner Dozois in *Year's Best*, was a sidebar to the Chaga Saga I'd wanted to write about for some time, but was leery about touching. It may be stating the glaringly obvious, but I'm not black, I'm not female, I'm not Kenyan. I drew much from the experiences of a Zairean refugee I know, and my own time in East Africa, but I was still worried writing it. It seems to have worked, and I'd like to go a bit further with Tendeleo and the world she is building. She's not an outsider, she's an insider.

NG: *Sacrifice of Fools*, third in your thematic Irish Trilogy, and one of your most compelling books, deals more closely and grittily than *King of Morning* with the realities of contemporary Ireland, going to the heart of Ulster's problems. Could one say that the thesis of this novel is that if there's one way to make ethno-religious factions comprehend their own bigotry, it's to introduce a third and far more different grouping into their midst – aliens, in this case?

IMD: More Outsiders, explicitly so this time. Of course, it's *Alien Nation* in Ulster. I feel that the film fudged the whole issue by making it a dumb drugs story. There was a lot of potential in the central premise of a whole rake of aliens being dropped as a sizeable ethnic group into our society, and us discovering that they aren't just Valley Folk in silly rubber heads, but have a core of alienness we can never touch. Hence, the Shi'an. They're the Great Science Fiction Cat, made into an alien race. A hunting society, both sexes sexually similar, that only have sex twice a year but when they have it, they *have* it? That's yer moggie, that

is. After that, the conceit's easy: drop them in Belfast rather than Los Angeles, throw in a serial killer and off you go. *Sacrifice* contains the only accurate sf prediction I ever made: The Patton Report into Policing recommended renaming the Royal Ulster Constabulary the Northern Ireland Police Service (which I call the new Joint Authority police force in the book), until they realized they'd get called the Nips instead of the Ruck, so it was recently changed again to Police Service for Northern Ireland (Psin?)

I'm not recommending massive social engineering as a device for conflict resolution, bringing everyone into contact with an external third force. Jehovah aside, trinities tend to be unstable, chaotic systems. It just seemed to be a useful tool for exploring the roots and branches of the conflict here – far from resolved yet. In the Shi'an sexual set-up, I could examine the Troubles as one big bloody male see-who-can-piss-the-highest contest, with guns. I've yet to find a corresponding way to use the Shi'an to explore female sexuality – they may not be the right construct to do it. I'd like to do more with Andy Gillespie, the reluctant ex-con turned investigator: he's a man who's made himself an outsider by being unable to accept the givens of his community. We'll see.

NG: A final question: your relationship with publishers has swung from early American success with Bantam and initial obscurity in Britain to current prominence in Britain and non-publication in America. Why has this occurred?

IMD: Why does a publisher dump anyone? You don't sell enough books. *Chaga* (*Evolution's Shore* in the US) got a big advance in the US and, nice reviews apart, didn't sell that tremendously, so when Bantam took a look at *Sacrifice of Fools*, they had a reason to say, "wouldn't know anything about that Irish stuff, nah." Likewise, with *Kirinya*, "that African stuff." It was also perceived as being anti-American. Balls. Anti-American corporatism, yes; if you guys seriously subscribe to "love me, love my corporations," you have my sympathies. It's like saying I'm anti-Irish because I laugh at *Westlife*.

But we're going to remedy that soon, I hope, with *Ares Express* and *Cyberabad* ("that Indian stuff"). *Cyberabad* is the fiction project now, and, as books about India tend to be, it's going to be big. Maybe not a Peter F. Hamilton, but I've eleven main characters and a lot of story, so it'll be thick. India in 2049 is a much bigger challenge than Kenya becoming alien; I'm delivering in June 2002 and there's a scad of work still to do before I hit the keys.

Marcher

Chris Beckett

“So... um... What do you do for a living?” the young woman asked. (Well, it is difficult to think of original questions to ask people at parties.)

The young man braced himself. “I am an immigration officer.”

“Oh, I...”

He laughed a little bitterly. “Be honest. Not what you expect to meet at a party of leftish 20- and 30-somethings!”

“No, I suppose...”

“You thought a teacher perhaps, or maybe a software engineer, not someone who chucks out illegal immigrants and shoves weeping asylum seekers back onto planes.”

The man checked himself. (His name incidentally was Huw.)

“Sorry,” he said. “That must have sounded a bit aggressive. The truth is I like to see myself as a leftish 20-something, and I sometimes feel like some kind of pariah among my peers.”

“I can imagine. In fact...”

She was going to say that she sympathized, that her own job also often attracted negative comment. But she decided to ask another question instead. He was an interesting young man: well dressed in a nicely understated way, quite poised, attractively reserved.

“So, why did you become an immigration officer? Did the pariah status appeal in some way? Or...”

“It seemed to me that it was too easy to disparage jobs of that kind. Mickey over there for example...” (Huw pointed to a university lecturer with tousled hair), “or Susan there. They are always having a go at me about the iniquities of forcing people to go home when they want to stay here. ‘No one leaves their own country except for a very good reason,’ Mickey always says. But what I always ask him is this: is he saying that there

should be no immigration controls at all? Is he saying people should come into this country entirely as they please, even if that meant taking in a million people a year? He will never answer my question. He waffles about how a million wouldn’t come and so on, but he never answers my question.”

“I can imagine,” said the young woman, who knew Mickey slightly.

“A country does need a boundary of some sort,” Huw went on. “An entity of any kind needs a boundary. And if a country has a boundary, it inevitably means that some people who want to come in will be turned away, by force if persuasion doesn’t work. It seems to me that people like Mickey don’t really offer any kind of alternative. So really what their position amounts to is: let someone else do the dirty work, so I can keep my hands clean.”

He smiled. “Right. Now I’ll shut up.”

“No, please don’t. I’m interested. And you haven’t answered *my* question. Why did you become an immigration officer?”

“For the reasons I’ve just explained! Because keeping boundaries is necessary and somebody has to do it. People like Mickey and Sue say the service is full of racists and reactionaries. Well, unless liberal-minded people are prepared to join, it would be, wouldn’t it?”

The young woman laughed. “Yes, but that still doesn’t explain why *you* joined. The world needs liberal-minded doctors too, no doubt, and teachers and... police officers... all sorts of things. So why this in particular? Why this for you?”

“I... um...”

Huw was genuinely bewildered. He could dimly perceive that this was indeed a different kind of question but it wasn’t one he’d ever asked himself. It was like a glimpse through a door into what might be another room,

or might more disturbingly be another entire world. He found himself noticing the young woman, not in a sexual way particularly, as far as he could tell, but just *noticing* her. She had made a connection.

"I don't really know," said Huw. "Why do *you* think?"

She laughed and for some reason blushed, which made him blush too.

"Well I don't know you!" she exclaimed. "How could I say?"

"I just thought you sounded as if you might have a theory."

She looked away, a movement that he found graceful and sweet (so now he *was* aware of sex). Then she shrugged and turned back to him.

"Well, I don't know you. But since you ask, my guess would be that there must be a reason within yourself that you are preoccupied with defending boundaries. Perhaps there is something inside that disturbs you and that you are trying to keep in, or something outside that frightens you. Perhaps you are afraid that if you get too close to anyone they will invade you and gobble you up."

She saw the discomfort in Huw's face.

"Sorry," she said, "that came out rather..."

"Not at all. I did ask. A bit deep for me, I'm afraid, though."

"I've upset you," she said, "and I really didn't mean to."

"Don't be silly," he said.

But he changed the subject abruptly, jaggedly, uttering some banalities about turning 30 (this was Susan's 30th) and how (help!) the next big leap after that would be 40. There was no connection between them now. The conversation petered out. She said she was going to try some of that delicious-looking food, and it was nice to meet him. He hurried for another glass of wine.

"Damn," he thought. "Why did I let that shake me? Why did I let her *see* it shook me?"

Later he thought, "I'm so self-absorbed. I didn't ask her name or what she did or anything."

He went to look for her, but it seemed she had eaten her food and left.

Back at his flat after the party, Huw needed somehow to collect himself before he could rest. As he sometimes did at times like this, he took a notebook out of a drawer and tried to write something down. He tried to define himself in some way.

"*Marcher*," he wrote at the top of the page.

Sometimes old words help. "*Marcher*" had more of a ring to it than "immigration officer."

"Let us put on armour, (he wrote)

Let us wear breastplates of polished bronze

And cover our faces with ferocious masks.

Let us be pure. Let us accept the cold.

Let us forswear the search for love.

*Let us ride in the bare places where the ground
is clinker*

And the towers are steel..."

And so on. He was rather pleased with it. (But then it

was late at night and he had taken a fair quantity of wine). Feeling he had somehow redeemed himself, he undressed, went to bed and was soon asleep.

The phone rang at seven o'clock in the morning. It was Huw's boss, Roger, to tell him a new case had surfaced in a Special Category estate to the south of town. Everyone else in the Section was tied up with other cases. Could he go straight there and make a start on the investigation?

At half past eight, slightly the worse for last night's wine, Huw was waiting in his car to go through the estate checkpoint. There were two vehicles ahead of him. In front of the checkpoint was a large sign:

DEPARTMENT FOR SPECIAL
CATEGORY ADMINISTRATION
- WORCESTER DISTRICT -

WELCOME TO PERRY MEADOWS

THIS IS A SPECIAL CATEGORY ESTATE WITHIN THE
MEANING OF THE WELFARE ADMINISTRATION ACT
YOU MAY BE REQUIRED TO PRODUCE IDENTIFICATION

DESCA

LET'S TACKLE THIS TOGETHER!

The other cars passed through and Huw handed up his ID to the DeSCA Constabulary officer. This was the border between the wider world and the world of the welfare claimants, the "dreggies" as they were known.

The officer swiped Huw's card in front of a reader.

"Immigration Service, eh?" he observed with a knowing grin. "Nothing to do with these rumours about appearances and disappearances by any chance?"

Huw reluctantly returned the smile. He disliked this sort of game. "Sorry, mate. No comment."

"Of course," said the officer, "quite correct. Welcome to Perry Meadows."

Huw had visited a fair few such places. Not that his agency had anything to do with the administration of Special Category estates, but the kinds of cases that he dealt with often cropped up in them (as well as in prisons, mental hospitals and private boarding schools).

Some estates were old concrete jungles, former "council estates" from the 1960s and '70s of the last century. But Perry Meadows was an estate of the new kind. It had trees and shrubs and artificial hills to screen off homes from the sight and sound of traffic. It had well-equipped playgrounds and shining community centres. It had attractive houses in at least ten quite different designs, with playful features like round windows and the occasional clock-tower or weather-vane, all brightly painted in cheerful nursery colours.

"These are not 'sink estates'," the Secretary of State for Special Category Administration had recently declared, "and they are not 'dreg' estates. They are *decent dwelling places* for human beings: fellow-citizens in our society who find themselves for whatever reason, *outside of* the economy and who require the special, focused, concentrated help that my department can offer, to find their way back inside it..."

But for all the clock-towers and weather-vanes, Perry Meadows seemed to Huw to be a kind of modern zoo, providing its inhabitants with living conditions that resembled the natural habitat of their species, yet denying them somehow the opportunity to really *be* themselves.

He was slightly discomfited by these thoughts, but his attention was elsewhere. He was keeping a look-out for certain telltale signs.

And sure enough, there they were. On one wall a slogan sprayed in day-glo pink. **ENDLESS WORLDS**, it read. On another, in silver, the symbol of a many-branched tree.

Yes, and here again, look, on a high brick wall at one end of a low-rise block of flats: an enormous tangled tree-form in luminous yellow with a single word splattered over it in red: **Igga!**

Inside the entrance of the DeSCA office there was a kind of carpeted airlock arrangement where Huw was required to show his card to a reader again and wait for clearance. A recorded message played while his details were being checked.

"Welcome to Perry Meadows Administration," said a sonorous male voice. "May we remind you that DeSCA and its partner agencies are committed to combating racism, sexism, homophobia and discrimination in all its forms, and our staff will challenge offensive or discriminatory language."

The inner door slid open and he was admitted to the Visitor Reception Area. (There was a separate reception area for Estate Residents.)

"Good morning, Mr Davis," said the receptionist, "Ms Rogers is on her way down to meet you. Can I get you a cup of coffee or anything?"

Ms Rogers was the Executive Director of the Perry Meadows estate. She was brisk and expensively dressed, with elegant short grey hair. Huw had met her kind before. They were mini-prime ministers of their own little kingdoms, with their own little governments of agency managers (police, social services, health, education, benefits, housing...). But in exchange for their empires they had made a kind of Faustian bargain. They had to keep the lid on things. If an estate child was battered to death by a parent, or there was a riot of some sort, or if too much drugs and crime seeped out from the estate into the normal world outside, then Ms Rogers' head would be on the block. Unless she could find someone else to blame, she would be the sacrificial victim when the world bayed, "Something must be done!"

So today she was anxious. She would not normally have had much time for this young immigration officer, junior to herself both in age and in status, but now she

badly needed his help. Huw savoured the situation.

"Mr Davis, I'm Janet Rogers. So good of you to have come here so quickly," she enthused as she ushered him into a spacious office fitted with pale, polished furniture. "As you'll have gathered this chap was picked up last night who sounds like one of your sort of cases. And a young girl disappeared a couple of days ago in a way that now looks as though it might be connected."

"Ms Rogers..."

"Oh, call me Janet, please..."

"Janet, I'd be pleased to talk later but my first priority has got to be to interview this man you've got in detention. These people have a way of disappearing."

"Yes, of course, I'll take you down to the police wing myself. Ah, here's your coffee. Did you want to drink it first? It would perhaps be an opportunity very briefly to..."

She was torn between her desire that Huw should deal with the matter quickly and her desire to hear his assessment of the situation.

"I'll take it with me if you don't mind."

"Yes, of course."

She led him along a corridor and into a lift.

"We've never had any sign of this sort of thing before," she said. "It's completely out of the blue."

"Actually," said Huw (they were emerging from the lift and heading along another corridor), "for future reference, the signs were there to be seen. The graffiti. Have you not noticed that big yellow tree? 'Igga?' You can see it from the car park of this building."

"The tree? Yes. I suppose I felt that a lot of young people have cottoned onto that tree thing. A sort of cult. Not necessarily an indication of actual... um..."

"Actually, the appearance of tree graffiti is thought to be a pretty reliable predictor of appearances or disappearances," Huw said.

"As you'll have no doubt read in the recent Home Office circular," he added innocently.

Janet Rogers pursed her lips slightly and said nothing. They had entered another airlock-like security door that led to the DeSCA Constabulary wing and were waiting for a policeman to come and let them through.

"Igga," said Ms Rogers. "Remind me, what is it supposed to be?"

"It's a representation of the multiverse. It's thought the word comes from *Yggdrasil*, the tree which contained the various worlds in Norse mythology. One theory is that there is a universe out there where the old Norse polytheistic religion never got supplanted by Christianity and continued into modern times, rather like Hinduism..."

But here the custody sergeant opened the door.

The prisoner had been picked up as the result of a drunken brawl. He was a thickset man with close-shaven red hair, about 30 years old. He possessed an ID card of sorts, with a photograph of himself and giving his name as Wayne Furnish. But, though the card purported to have been issued in the last six months it was quite different in design from the cards used either by special-category citizens or by the population at large. The address it gave was local but non-existent, as was The Central

Population Register, which (according to the card) was the issuing agency. And Wayne's fingerprints did not correspond to any in the national databank.

Yet he spoke English not only fluently but also with the characteristic slightly rustic version of a Brummie accent that was spoken in the Worcester dreg estates. This was no foreigner.

"Ah!" he said, as Wayne was introduced to him. "The Ickies, eh? I thought you boys would be showing up soon."

Ickies! Huw could have clapped his hands with professional pleasure. This was classic stuff: a local accent but a word or a phrase that locals never used.

He settled down into the chair opposite Wayne Furnish. The officer who had shown him in waited by the door.

"Ickies? You'll have to explain that to me, Wayne."

"Ickies! Incomer Control. That's what you are, yeah?"

"Incomer Control? No, the Immigration Service we call it."

"Ah. Well, I don't come from round here."

"You don't come from Worcester?"

Wayne narrowed his eyes and regarded Huw for a moment.

"Not from *this* Worcester. You know I don't, mate, or you wouldn't be here would you?"

"So how did you get here?"

"Shifter pills, of course. *Seeds*, as we call them."

"These, yes?"

Huw held out a small plastic bag which the police had confiscated from Wayne when they arrested him. It contained two dull-red capsules.

"Yup. I ain't bothered, mate. I swallowed one when the old bill knocked on the door. I've got a seed in my blood."

"Do you mind telling me a bit more about where you come from?"

The shifter shrugged. "The place I come from is shit. This place is just as bad. But it don't matter. Know what I mean? A couple of hours and I won't be here any more, mate. This'll be an empty room and I'll be somewhere where you won't never find me."

Huw nodded. He took out the standard checklist and started to go through it. What was the Prime Minister's name where Wayne came from? Was there a Perry Meadows there? (No, but there was an estate on the same site called Daisyfields.) What was currently in the news there? Who were the top football teams?... and so on. The idea was to accumulate a sort of map of the different worlds, the gradients of difference, the routes along which the shifters moved.

"None of this matters to me," Wayne said, after a few minutes. "Know what I mean? I'm a warrior of Dunner, I am. That's why I got this hammer on my arm. No one can shut me up in dreg estates no more. I'm a warrior of Dunner and my home is the Big Tree."

He grunted. "And if you want me to answer any more questions, mate, I need a cup of tea and packet of cigs."

Janet Rogers seemed to have been hovering over her phone for the three hours that Huw spent with the shifter. As soon as he emerged she was there to meet him and take him back to her office, where members of her man-

agement team were also waiting (C. I. Thomas, "my police chief," Dave Ricketts, "my senior registration manager," Val Hollowby, "my head of welfare"...).

"How did you get on?" they all wanted to know, as they plied Huw eagerly with coffee and sandwiches. "Has he been here long? Do you think this is an isolated case?"

"He's been here a month or so," Huw said. "Living in hiding, trading on the glamour of coming from another world. There are others, I would guess, though Wayne wouldn't say so. The ones who follow Dunner like to shift in groups, we've noticed as a rule."

"But if it's a drug which they each take separately, how could they all end up in the same place?" asked Mr Ricketts.

Huw smiled, concealing his irritation. He could tell that these people had been stewing here all morning, rationalizing, minimizing, trying to persuade themselves that there wasn't a reason to panic. There was a fug of fear in the room. And what was it they were afraid of? The universe itself had sprung a leak in their backyard – the *universe!* – but that wasn't what bothered them. No, what they were worried about was being told off for not noticing it quickly enough.

"People often ask how they cross over together," he said to Mr Ricketts. "The other question people ask is how can a drug bring over the clothes they wear and the things they have in their pockets? Well the truth is we still have absolutely no idea how the 'seeds' work. But the scientists reckon that we're all still asking the wrong questions. Trying to understand the seeds by comparing them to other drugs is like trying to understand a magnet by weighing it or testing its hardness. There is some force involved which is fundamentally different from the ones we know about and feel we understand."

"You say he's a follower of Dunner?" asked C. I. Thomas, "Dunner is a pagan god, yes?"

"That's right," said Huw, "the thunder god: Donner, Dunar, Thor..." He repeated a piece of doggerel that another shifter had once taught him:

"Wotty wiv 'is one eye,
Dunner wiv 'is cock,
Frija wiv 'er big tits,
And two-faced Lok."

The assembled managers laughed uncomfortably.

"Does that mean he comes from a society which is still pagan?" asked Janet Rogers.

"No, he doesn't. He comes from a society very much like this, with a few minor differences (what we call the DeSCA is known as the DoSCA there, for example). The pagan cult must originate in a world that diverged much longer ago. But it seems to have spread very rapidly across many worlds with the shifters, just as the shifter pills themselves – the seeds – have done."

He finished his sandwiches.

"Now I need to look into this disappearance. This young girl..."

Val Hollowby, the gaunt-looking Head of Welfare, told him the story.

"Yes, this was a girl called Tamsin Pendant, 15 years

old. She's got a lot of problems. Physical abuse. Sexual abuse. Been in the care system for four years. Lots of problems there. Placements breaking down. Absconding. Drugs. For the last two months she's been living in our Residential Assessment Unit. She's been talking a lot recently, so I now gather, about shifters, and seeds and Dunner and all that. I suppose we should have taken more notice."

Suddenly she leaned forward, looking into Huw's face with cavernous, urgent eyes: "But you know, Mr Davis, they *all do*. It's easy enough with hindsight to say we could have seen the signs!"

Huw nodded, non-committally. "Who was the last person to see her?"

"Her social worker, Jazamine Bright. Two days ago. Took her out to talk to her about some of her recent problems. Tamsin felt got at. When Jaz dropped her off at the unit she announced that she was going to disappear and Jaz would never see her again. It seems she never actually went inside after Jaz drove off. We assumed she'd just absconded, something she's done many times before. But of course when Janet told me about this shifter chap showing up I realized there might be a connection. Too late, of course, as will doubtless be said at the enquiry."

Ms Hollowby gave a bitter little snort. "Though even if we *had* made the connection, I can't see there's much we could have done."

Huw made no comment on this. "Well, my next job is to interview Jazamine Bright," he said.

"She's standing by," cried Janet Rogers. "We've booked an interview room for you. Would you like any more coffee? Or perhaps a cup of tea?"

"Hello!" Jazamine exclaimed as Huw stood up to greet her. "I know you. The frontiersman! But you said you were an immigration officer, putting weeping refugees back on planes!"

She was the young woman from Susan's party. The one who had unsettled him by asking him why he did his job.

"Well, I *am* an immigration officer. It's just that I've moved on from dealing with the national boundary, to..."

"...to guarding the universe itself," she interrupted. "Wow!"

She had seen right through him. Huw found himself reddening not just with embarrassment but with real shame. He remembered the poem he'd written last night.

"I'll tear it up and burn it as soon as I get home," he vowed to himself.

But out loud he stubbornly defended his ground. "It's important," he said. "Imagine if everyone could escape at will from the consequences of their actions. Imagine what it would do to the idea of responsibility and accountability and right and wrong!"

No one seemed to *get* it, the real enormity of it. No one! Not even the other members of his own Section.

"Tamsin Pendant wasn't escaping from the consequences of her actions," protested Jazamine Bright. "She was trying to escape from a world in which she was of no consequence at all. In fact it must be hard for Tamsin to believe that she ought to be here at all. For a start she

was conceived in a rape. Her father went to prison as a result."

"God!" breathed Huw. "Imagine that. Your very existence the result of a terrible transgression."

"*Transgression*," observed Jazamine. "That's an interesting choice of word." She smiled. "But you're right," she went on, "there is something terribly contradictory about it: existing only because of a crime against your mother. And, now I think about it that way, Tamsin's whole life is full of contradictions. She craves for love but she always rejects affection and support; she's a tenacious fighter but she always anticipates defeat; she's clever but she's barely literate..."

Jazamine considered for a moment.

"Yes," she added, "and Tamsin's very pretty but she loathes her own body so much that she attacks it with knives and razor blades."

She told Huw that Tamsin had talked on and off about Dunner and Igga and "seeds" for some weeks and had several times before talked of disappearing "into the Tree." But in the past the disappearances that had followed such talk had gone no further than empty garages and paper-recycling dumps where Tamsin and various friends had holed up for a few nights before being picked up by the police.

Yesterday morning Jazamine had been up to the Residential Assessment Centre to go through Tamsin's things and look for clues to her whereabouts. There had been a diary with several mentions of someone called Wayne who was going to "sort things" for her (for what price, it wasn't clear).

"Anyway, these are Tamsin's files," Jazamine said, pushing a large pile of manila folders across the desk. "Val tells me you may need to see them. Here's a photo of Tamsin in this one, look. A really beautiful girl, I always think."

She was. But Huw was noticing Jazamine. He was appreciating the fact that she showed none of the fear that had so irritated him in the estate management team. In her work with Tamsin, Jazamine had certainly failed to notice things which in hindsight were significant. But "Well, these things happen" seemed to be her attitude.

"Thanks," said Huw, "I'll have a quick look at them. Then I'll go and have a word with the staff at the residential centre. Nice to meet you again."

Jazamine stood up. "Yes, listen, I was rude about your job just now. I'm sorry. I was just nervous that's all – and upset for Tamsin. Please don't be offended. You seem very nice. I like the way you're passionate about what you do."

He smiled. "Well, thank you. I found it interesting what you asked me at the party – about why do I do this. I've never stopped to think about it like that before."

"Oh, well, good." She hesitated. "You don't fancy meeting up sometime, socially I mean, for a drink or something?"

"Well, I'd like to but I'm not really supposed to..."

"...to socialize with people who are involved in your investigations? I see. Another boundary, eh?"

"Boundaries are important," Huw insisted.

"So they are," she replied, "but they aren't the *only*

important thing.”

He laughed. “No. You’re right. And I’d like to have a drink with you. How about at the weekend?”

So then there was Huw alone looking at the file and feeling – what? – slightly *dazed* in a not unpleasant kind of way. How sweet that Jazamine had taken a liking to him. How strange.

He turned his attention to the files. Yes, she was a pretty girl, this Tamsin Pendant, a pretty, blonde little waif looking out from a blurry photo taken on some institutional outing to Barry Island. Poor child. Where was she now? Young shifters were very vulnerable in a new world, because they had to depend on adults to hide them from the authorities. Underage prostitutes picked up by the police, for example, had more than once turned out to be shifters from other worlds.

Well, may Dunner protect you Tamsin, Huw thought.

It was odd. He had never met this girl. He was twice her age. He came from a completely different kind of background. Yet as he looked at the photo he felt strangely close to her. As if they shared something in common.

And then he thought: Yes, that’s it! It’s like poachers and gamekeepers. It’s set a thief to catch a thief. I am in this work because I feel like a shifter myself – a shifter or a refugee. *That’s* why I chose to patrol the border. So I could look over at the other side.

He became suddenly very aware of the two “seeds” that the police had handed over, now in his briefcase right in front of him.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” he said aloud, shaking himself.

There was a knock at the door. It was a police officer from the custody suite.

“Sorry to disturb you Mr Davis. I’ve been asked to let you know. That Wayne Furnish has disappeared. Vanished from a locked cell. Could you spare a moment to come down and talk to the officers on duty?”

Back in the police wing the duty sergeant and another officer were waiting. They showed Huw the empty cell and watched him while he went in. The smell in there was unmistakable: a burnt, electrical, ozone tang.

“Yes, he’s done a shift all right,” Huw said. “Don’t worry. There was absolutely nothing you or anyone could have done.”

He looked at the stunned faces of the sergeant and the two young officers. “A bit disturbing for you, yes?”

“Nothing like this has ever happened to any of us,” said the sergeant. “We’re a bit spooked by it, to be honest with you.”

Huw turned back into the room and sniffed the hot, burnt smell.

“It *is* uncomfortable, I know. One of them disappeared right in front of me once. Just a kind of popping sound as the air rushed into the vacuum where he had been. Then nothing. There’s something violent about it, isn’t there? Something violent and shocking.”

“Violent I can cope with,” the sergeant said, “shocking I can cope with. But this...”

Huw nodded. “Listen. There’s one thing I should warn you about. We don’t really know how the seeds work, but it’s something more like a force field than a drug. You can get some side-effects if you’ve been near a shifter, especially if you’ve been near him when he crosses over: strange dreams, vivid images, unfamiliar impulses...”

The three policemen waited expectantly. They wanted something more from him. They wanted him to take the nightmare away. He was the expert. It was his job. Again he felt angry, though he would have found it difficult to say exactly why. But he managed a reassuring tone.

“Don’t worry. These things do pass. But you may not sleep very well tonight.”

Huw interviewed all the staff and residents at the Assessment Unit as well as two young men picked up by the police at the same time as Wayne Furnish. When he got back to his flat at just before 10 pm, he phoned his supervisor, Roger to report back..

“No leads to other shifters at all, I’m afraid. It’s possible that Wayne really was the only one here. Anyway you’ll have my written report in the morning.”

Roger told him that it had been a busy day for the whole section. A group of three shifters had been picked up in a Shropshire public school, and as many as eight missing persons were now thought to be linked to their arrival.

“That’s why I couldn’t give you any back-up. It’s getting silly. Whitehall’s going to have to get its head out of the sand and give us some real support with this or we may as well throw in the towel.”

“The police took two seeds off this Furnish man. I should have brought them back to the office for safe-keeping, but I didn’t get round to it. Sorry. They’re locked in my briefcase. I’ll bring them in first thing.”

“That’s fine. And there you are... Look, Huw, we’ve achieved something. That’s two less new shifters!”

Huw said nothing.

“Huw? Are you still there?”

“Yes, sorry. Attention wandered. Tired I suppose. Two less shifters, you said? I don’t quite...”

“A good day’s work, Huw. Now forget all about it and get some sleep.”

Roger had only recently transferred from general immigration work at Heathrow, and was not personally familiar with the effects of dealing with shifters. Otherwise he might have realized that wishing Huw a good night’s sleep was a little unkind.

Huw put down the phone. He felt vertiginous and slightly nauseous. It was the same each time. It didn’t diminish with experience.

He made himself heat a small meal in the microwave. Then he poured himself a drink and sat down to draft the report of the day’s investigations.

It was after one in the morning when he finished work – and then the sudden absence of a task left him feeling disturbingly empty, as if busy-ness had been a kind of screen. He remembered the insight that had come to him as he looked at the picture of Tamsin Pendant.

“I am a shifter too,” he thought, “or worse than that:

I am the shifter equivalent of a voyeur. I like to watch. At least Tamsin and Wayne have the guts to really do it."

And again he felt that alarmingly powerful urge to take the seeds from his briefcase and swallow one himself. It would be like suicide, as a shifter had once said to him, "like suicide but without the drawbacks."

"Come on," he tried to tell himself. "Don't be silly. This is just..."

But he was too tired. He exhausted himself daily trying to defend a frontier which lay wide open all around him and which nobody else seemed to really see. It was too much to keep on fighting now when it had opened up inside his own head.

"I will go to bed and wait until morning," he said out loud. "And if I feel the same way then I will do it."

He was amazed to hear what had emerged from his own mouth.

All night his mind divided in the darkness, fecund as Igga, like bacteria multiplying in a Petri dish.

He walked along dim corridors with many doors; he climbed enormous flights of stairs with missing steps and broken banisters. He teetered on the top of a precarious pinnacle above an ocean that seethed with fish and whales. He glimpsed Wayne Furnish on a headland in the distance brandishing Dunner's hammer. He saw Janet Rogers and all her management team round a table in the middle of the sea. Many times he felt himself falling. Once Jazamine appeared and whispered to him, so clearly that he was jolted awake by the shock.

"I could love you," she whispered.

Another time she held out a seed to him.

Towards dawn, with extraordinary clarity, he had a vision of Tamsin Pendant, alone in one of the neat, grassy spaces of Perry Meadows. She was standing still but the houses were dancing around her, appearing and disappearing again, changing in shape and size as the worlds passed her by. Once a block of flats six storeys high appeared right in front of Tamsin's face. A few seconds later a lorry honked and swerved as she appeared, fleetingly, in the middle of a road. Tamsin was green with nausea.

A mean little shopping precinct appeared around her. Startled faces turned in her direction, then vanished. For just a moment she was standing in the pouring rain. There was another shopping precinct, then another. Some sort of grey civic sculpture began to skip and jump around her, changing shape from a man to a bird to a cube of welded girders... Then it vanished. The buildings vanished too. The dance had reached an end.

It was a sunny day. She was in a wide meadow full of buttercups. A lark sang high above her. A mild breeze blew in her face. Tamsin dropped to her knees and was violently sick.

In the distance was a wire perimeter fence with cranes and bulldozers parked alongside it. It was the same in every direction. The wide meadow was a building site. They were about to build a new estate.

As Huw's alarm beeped the universe split into three.

In one universe he jumped out of bed and swallowed the seeds in his brief case, following Tamsin Pendant before he had time to consider the warning in his dream.

In another he renounced not only the shifter pills, but also Jazamine Bright. "I will phone her from the office today and cancel the drink," he decided, foreswearing love and friendship for his lonely and thankless calling.

And in a third universe, he made a different choice again.

"No. No seeds," he told his reflection in the shaving mirror "But I *will* see Jazamine. Boundaries are important, but they're not the only important thing."

He smiled. He had a pleasant smile, when he took off his marcher's helmet and laid down his marcher's shield.

Chris Beckett's most recent stories in *Interzone* were "The Marriage of Sky and Sea" (issue 153), "The Gates of Troy" (issue 154), "The Welfare Man Retires" (issue 158) and "Snapshots of Apirania" (issue 160). A former social worker, now a university lecturer, living in Cambridge, he is the author of many previous pieces for us – and seems to be becoming a favourite of American anthologists, who keep taking his stories for reprinting.

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Hugh O'Neill's Goose

Henry Wessells

Selections from the secret diary of Pól Ó Dubhthaigh (1569-1652)*:

16 May 1595. The bamboo plant is like the human spirit, for given sufficient air and light and water and peace it will flourish in any land. The rootings that I brought back from China quickly established themselves in a corner of the gardens at Rome and those I carried with me on the further voyage to my native Ireland have grown to a prodigious height in four short months. The bamboo's growth is the sole propitious sign I have witnessed since returning to the island that was my childhood home. The situation in Ireland is unendurable. The English laws and plantations weigh heavily upon the land and the English seek to force their heresy upon us at sword's point. Only here in the north have the Gaelic lords retained sufficient power to oppose the agents of the English Queen. Hugh O'Neill, my lord the earl of Tyrone, seeks to convince his peers of Ulster to cease their customary feuding and campaign in unity against the invader and carry the war into all of Ireland. Only this will save our people and language.

23 May 1595. The wind is brisk and steady this morning, reminding me of the unceasing winds that swept

down from the hills across Nanch'ang. Only these Irish winds are warm and moist and bear the smells of sunshine and peat and willows, of the rushy lands of the black bog and the expanses of heather in the red bogs. These are fragrances that I have remembered since I left Ireland at thirteen to be educated by the Society of Jesus and memories that I have carried with me through India and China. I was told by a fellow Irishman that when I lay ill with fever in Kwangtung, I babbled of birds descending on the bogs in the winter moons and other such visions of childhood. Now, once more in Ireland, I recall the skies over Chinese cities and the sound and smells carried by those dry winds with a yearning that surprises me.

25 May 1595. My lord O'Neill, whose grandsire was Conn O'Neill, is a shrewd and courageous man nearly thirty years my senior. He has risen high in the years since I left Ireland. At that time he had not long succeeded his murdered brother as Baron Dungannon. Though he worked closely enough with the invaders in his youth and was named earl of Tyrone, as his power has grown, so have his suspicions of the English. For more than a decade he has been tanist or heir designate to The O'Neill and is without doubt the most influential

*The *Diaries of Paul Duffy: A Jesuit Educator in China and Rural Ireland* were published in two volumes in Dublin in 1885, translated from the Latin and Gaelic by Liam O'Donnell. The original diaries, long believed to have been lost in the aftermath of the First World War, recently came to light in a Denver attic; they were sold at auction to a bookseller representing an unnamed private collector. The selection follows the text of the 1885 edition.

of the tribal rulers in Ireland. I have been gathered into his household, though I have few illusions as to why the welcome is so warm. Far more than my person, Hugh O'Neill values my ties to the continent and the means he rightly suspects I have for rapid communication with my fellows in Spain. The secrecy of these channels is without doubt the most important part of their usefulness to us both. O'Neill is a capable organizer of men and is much interested by my observations of military and civil life in China. He is a master of traditional Irish warfare: ambushes and defensive fighting and careful sallies against the English marching columns. I fear my fragmentary reports are of little use to him.

31 May 1595. This day O'Neill asked me to come with him to inspect his new brewhouse. Once out of doors, he asked me openly how soon I might have a confidential message in Spain and expect an answer. I told him sixteen days though I usually have a reply within a fortnight. He asked further if my message could reach the Spanish court. He must have mistaken my cautious surprise for a negative as he grabbed my arm and bellowed at me... I shook my arm free and answered, somewhat curtly, yes. He then directed me to encipher a notice that the catholic lords of Ulster would be engaging the English marshal on chosen ground within two weeks and sought future assistance from Spain contingent upon proofs of success in battle... At this, I could not contain my astonishment, for O'Neill's wife is sister to Bagenal, the English marshal. He said to me, you are one of us in earnest, now, Pól, there is no turning back.

10 June 1595. It is dark now and I write this by candlelight with weary fingers. I have spent the day harvesting the tallest stems of my bamboo and executing a plan that emerged fully fledged from a strange dream linking China and Ireland. Above the Chinese city of Nanch'ang, children flew brightly coloured kites on the wind from the hills. I found myself at the top of a long open field at the edge of the city, standing within the structure of a vast rectangular kite. At my signal, as I began running, all the fathers and lay members of the mission began running too and pulling on a long slender rope attached to the kite. Within moments, I was aloft on paper wings, high above the city, which was revealed to me in its entirety. The wind strengthened and I rose higher and saw the forces of an army approaching the city from the north. I released the rope joining me to the ground and flew still higher and then began floating out over the city in an easterly direction. The shapes of the fields below me changed from flooded rice paddies gleaming in the sun to the landscapes of Ireland: broken pastures at the edge of the bog and then the bog itself with expanses of heather, pools and mosses. As I began to descend toward the largest of the pools, I found that I had turned into a huge goose and alighted on the water with the gentle sound of that grey traveller who comes to Ireland on the wind from the distant north. I awoke a moment later, my mind filled with structural details and my head spinning with the strange sensation of

flight. I hurried in my dressing and found O'Neill, who instantly grasped the value of my plan and ordered his women to gather fine linen cloth and cords. By nightfall the framework was nearly secure. I must rush to complete the device before the expected battle. I hope that the wind holds steady in the daylight hours.

11 June 1595. Under my close supervision, the women finished stretching the linen over the bamboo frame of my kite at mid afternoon. There remained a steady wind from the north, which I thought a good sign. When I told O'Neill that I was prepared to attempt the flight, he said, you are my grey Jesuit goose, Pól, but you are braver than any man in my army. He directed twenty young men to accompany me to the hillside and do my bidding. At first, they were not serious and nothing much came of our running. I floated up a yard or two and then came back down upon my feet. The sun was low in the sky when O'Neill came to watch us make the third attempt. As I ran down the hill I sensed the men pulling at the rope and felt myself borne up and up like a feather in a gale. More cord was paid out and I was lifted higher by the sharpening wind. I shifted my weight and manoeuvred my feet into the stirrups at the back of the kite. The experience was precisely like my dream and yet entirely dissimilar. The O'Neill stronghold and surrounding lands spread out beneath me clearer than any wood engraved panorama in the libraries in Rome. Even in the fading light I could see for miles. The racing of my heart was louder than anything except O'Neill's shouts of praise. After a time, I called down to two of the men, who gripped the cord tight and walked toward the river, pulling me along with the ease of boys steering a kite on a Chinese rooftop. At my next command, they began to shorten the rope. I was somewhat bruised in the suddenness of the final descent, but the wing was not damaged. O'Neill told me, if you are brave enough to be O'Neill's goose on the morn's morn, Pól, you will change forever the way battles are fought.

13 June 1595. O'Neill's forces have defeated an English army at Clontibret commanded by Bagenal himself. We spent the previous day reaching O'Neill's position. His scouts had located several promising hillsides and O'Neill told my crew which of these would be most central to his position. When the wind rose shortly after dawn, I prepared to ascend. My crew worked with a will and I was soon floating at the end of a cord twice as long as that used in the first attempt. The sense of bodily unease I felt on the first flight had vanished entirely. I surveyed the countryside and located what appeared to be Bagenal's troops advancing along one of the roads. I wrote a brief note for O'Neill and wrapped it round a pebble and dropped it. When I saw a youth collect the note, I determined to release the cord and attempt the next stage. All of my crew looked up as the rope slackened suddenly in their hands and fell to earth. That much I saw before concentrating on riding the wind, which bore me back behind O'Neill's ambush and away from the scene of the coming battle. I floated above a succession of fields and

heard the lowing of cattle and the splash of water in tiny streams. Faint scents reached me: peat smoke, grasses, heather and stone. After a time I noticed that the kite was descending and found that by shifting my weight I could exert a small influence on the direction of my flight. Disengaging my feet from the stirrups as I approached a stand of rushes beside a large pool, I made a more graceful landing than on the first attempt. I carried my kite as far as the nearest farmstead and was then some hours in returning to the O'Neill rearguard, where all celebrated the outcome of the decisive engagement. O'Neill was red-faced and high spirited when I rejoined him, pleased with the intelligence I had provided him in the morning and interested in hearing of the flight. He commanded me to build more of the devices and bade me train other men to be O'Neill's tethered geese. Little remains of my clump of bamboo so I must see what can be done with willow branches.

30 September 1595. Hugh O'Neill has succeeded Turlough Luineach as The O'Neill and moves from success to success. I have trained or convinced six young men scarcely more than boys to ride up in the kites as observers for O'Neill's captains. They allow themselves to be carried aloft readily enough and provide useful, often critical intelligence that has more than once turned the tide of battle. Though I have explained to them the techniques of untethered flight, none of them has followed my example. O'Neill has asked me to refrain from writing of my discovery to any of my fellows, lest the English learn the secret. At present, despite some misgivings, I have acceded to his request, but have recorded detailed drawings of my designs elsewhere in this journal.

9 August 1598. I have come back to Ireland after two years in the Chinese mission. The O'Neill embraced me heartily when I entered his hall and said he had used all his influence with the Spanish court to have me returned to him. I have need of my great grey goose, Pól, he said, all but one of my tethered geese have lost their feathers. Your bamboo has been growing tall these two years. In a barn I saw what remains of the ruined kites. His artisans could sometimes repair the damage incurred in crash landings but were unable in the end to duplicate my success. Two of the boys whom I trained had been killed when sudden gusts of wind sent the kites spinning out of control. The English have seen the geese above the battle grounds but O'Neill's spies indicate that they remain ignorant of the means of attaining flight. My original bamboo kite was the only one still in service, much mended but still apparently sound. The bamboo has flourished untended in my absence and the thicket should yield enough cane for several kites. O'Neill said, Pól, I have need of four geese inside a week's time when we move to drive the English from Ulster.

12 August 1598. Four new kite frames are complete and await O'Neill's women to stretch and secure the linen. One of the artisans worked with me on the frames and seems to have grasped the necessity for lightness and

strength. During my recent sojourn in Nanch'ang I spoke with the children of the gutter when I found them building or flying their patched and variegated kites. A recitation of my own dispossessed childhood conquered their initial diffidence. I was youngest of ten children and but nine years of age when Munster rose in rebellion against the English. My father was driven from his farm and declared a traitor. Swiftly captured, he was executed without a trial. One of the village priests noting my intelligence, I was first made a ward of a priest in Limerick and then sent to Spain to further my education. In China, I soon learned the language and translated mathematical and astronomical works. I have built one of the new kites much larger than my original pattern and adapted to its design certain features shewn to me by the Chinese boys that should increase my ability to control my flight.

14 August 1598. The Gaelic lords of Ulster have dealt another blow to the English invaders. O'Neill and his armies defeated Bagenal at Yellow Ford between the Blackwater and Armagh in an incident that will have consequences throughout the entire island. The four tethered geese provided O'Neill's captains with intelligence of the movements on both sides of the battle line. I took to the skies only well after the battle was under way and for nearly two hours passed reports down to the wooded hill-top where O'Neill had his base. When I saw that the English troops were beginning to flee in disorder, I dropped a final report and cast loose my tether. The kite surged upward in the warm noon sky and for a moment I thought that I would soar away from the earth to the stars. The auxiliary wing and primitive air rudders have improved stability and I was soon flying away to the west at great speed and without losing height. The settled lands gave way to bog and rough pastures. This sensation of soaring is more intoxicating than any liquor I have tasted in Europe or Asia and yet I am entirely clear-headed as I feel vitality flooding through my limbs. I passed the shoulder of Slieve Beagh far to the south of my path and soon saw a long stretch of water before me. As I manoeuvred the kite toward the north I felt myself caught in another warm updraught. Again I felt that I would soon leave the earth forever. My astronomical training assures me of the impossibility of touching the stars yet in those rising moments I felt I was transcending the knowledge contained in Aristotle and Tycho Brahe.

After a time I recognized one of the islands in Lough Erne and understood that I must descend or I would reach Donegal Bay beyond which there is no land before the blessed isles of St. Brendan. I made a rough landing along the river near Ballyshannon and found a horse to carry me to Donegal where I brought news of the English defeat at Yellow Ford to a startled Hugh Roe O'Donnell. My lord O'Donnell, the earl of Tyrconnell, agreed to send a messenger to O'Neill and to arrange transportation for me and the kite back to Tyrone. On my part, I consented to suggest that O'Neill make one or two of the kites available to O'Donnell's armies.

29 November 1598. Word that revolt burns anew in

Munster has reached me here in Goa where I await the departure of the next ship to China. Before I left Ireland I sought to convince O'Neill that he must share the secret of the kites with other Gaelic lords. Only most reluctantly and after I promised to build him three more kites did he concur. He sent two of the tethered geese to O'Donnell who has come under frequent attack from forces under Sir Conyers Clifford, the English president of Connacht.

2 December 1599. The first news from Europe in nearly a year reached the mission at Nanking yesterday. I paid little heed to the reading of the letters until I heard that the war against the English has spread throughout Ireland. The efficacy of O'Neill's influence in Spain has grown with his continued success for I have been ordered to conclude my work here in China and prepare my notes during the voyage back to Europe, where I will be permanently assigned to Ireland. I told Ricci of my bitter disappointment that I will not be here to accompany him to Peking. This evening, with a sly smile, he handed me a Chinese book on kite-making, *On the Art of Wind and Wing*, and said, perhaps you might translate this during the return. I have never discussed my interest in kites with him, much less my practical experiments in Ireland, yet I wonder how much he knows.

29 May 1600. The Spanish ship landed me on the coast of Donegal, where an O'Neill horseman awaited me. We rode hard across the boglands and through the mountains to Tullahogue. O'Neill has returned to the north from successful campaigns in Munster. Sorely tried in the plantation lands, the English have sent a new army to Derry as if to enter the supremacy of O'Neill by stealth. O'Neill must look to his back door while ensuring that the other lords press the English at every turn. I am instructed to prepare and train as many tethered geese as I can. There is no lack of bamboo or linen or young men whom O'Neill has commanded to obey me.

29 September 1601. Last winter, when the land starved under Mountjoy's policy of frightfulness and fields lay bare and burned, the Spanish sent much needed arms and gold. Now, as the fields await harvest, we have received word that a Spanish army has landed at Kinsale in the far south. O'Neill and O'Donnell are summoning their *bonnachts* and expect to have ten thousand soldiers ready to march within weeks. I have a dozen men trained to fly the tethered geese to gather intelligence and have now two artisans who seem competent to make repairs to the kites. We will travel south with the armies.

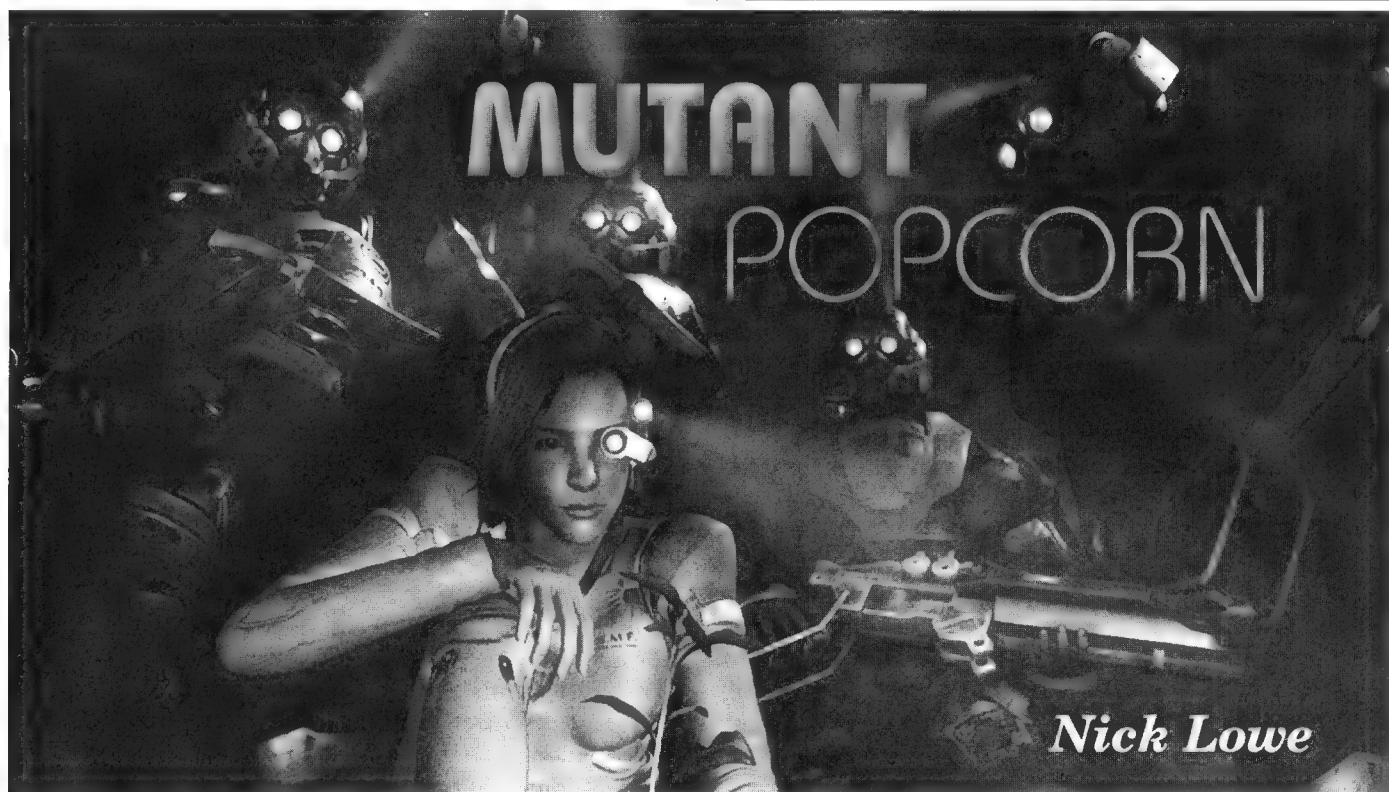
26 December 1601. Two days past I saw the ruin of Irish hopes. Attempting to relieve the Spanish troops besieged within Kinsale and trap Mountjoy between two fires, the Ulster lords of the lightning ambush found themselves instead engaged in a battle of massive formations. I went aloft to scout the situation for O'Neill and saw the other tethered geese rise into the skies above the Ulster companies and the allies from Connacht and Munster. The winds were the strongest I had ever experienced.

I ordered my crew to pay out more cord in hope of rising above the gusts. For an hour or more the progress of the battle seemed favourable but then I saw rank after rank of our horsemen deserting the field. I sent word down to The O'Neill and shortly thereafter saw the regrouping of the armies. Yet the manoeuvres seemed futile. Mountjoy's troops advanced and overran the Irish divisions. A sudden storm came off the ocean. I felt myself picked up like a dry leaf and released the cord instantly. As I began to soar upwards I saw the nearest of the tethered geese twist and plunge to the earth and then witnessed the same terrible fate befell three more kites. After that I saw no more of the battle, for I was flying northwest above the Bandon river and across the farmlands to Killarney and Kerry. None of my earlier flights prepared me for the speed and uncertainty of this passage. I flew before a storm that seemed to tear rooftops from houses and scour the mountains through which it roared. I saw columns of lightning split the sky and felt my body shaken by thunder and the untamed elements... At dusk, for a moment, as I flew across the wind-tossed sea, I saw the storm clouds part in the west and the sky filled with fire. It was a storm that marks the end of the old Gaelic world. I landed heavily on the north shore of the Dingle bay. Chilled to the bone, I found refuge in the village church. The bamboo kite is in ruins and my left arm is broken... I fear for the safety of O'Neill and O'Donnell should they fall into the hands of the English.

11 April 1603. O'Neill has sent word to me here in Dingle of the death of Elizabeth. He surrendered to a representative of the new Scottish king of England, who has assured him of a pardon. Hugh Roe O'Donnell is dead in Spanish exile, his brother now the earl of Tyrconnell. O'Neill's chief vassals have submitted and the stronghold at Tullahogue is in ruins. All of the tethered geese perished at Kinsale. I alone survived the storm. I do not think the English know my name so I feel safe to remain here and serve as a village priest and teacher of Gaelic prosody.

1 January 1608. News of the flight of the earls of Tyrone and Tyrconnell and the forfeiture of their lands has reached even here in Dingle. I have refused a summons to return to Spain and have stated that I am indispensable in my present office. The Gaelic tongue will perhaps survive in these remote reaches. I wonder if the new English overlords of Tyrone will recognize that it is Chinese bamboo that grows in a sheltered corner of the ruins of Tullahogue.

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Nick Lowe

Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within is a film from such a different place that its most remarkable achievement has been the ease with which it's managed to go down at the domestic box office by passing for a routine alien shootup. Attention has focused primarily on its innovative if hardly photo-realistic character animation, but this is probably the least extraordinary thing about this exotic, ambitious, and at its best thrillingly strange hybrid of the great entertainment cultures of east and west. A literally mid-Pacific film, made on US soil by a Japanese studio set up for the purpose in Honolulu, *Final Fantasy* is both the first American-made *anime* and the first film adaptation of a major game franchise to be directed by the games' own creator, whose overall control of script and production has survived the attachment of a host of professional Hollywood people to both.

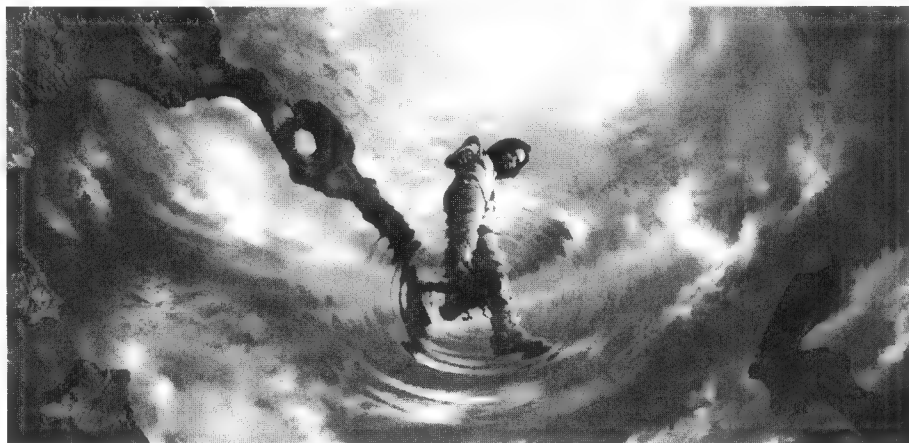
Final Fantasy's mad plot is propelled by an exhilaratingly incomprehensible *manga* logic, elaborating the narrative armature of the *FF* games (ectoplasmic alien invaders who have to be shot up as you roam around levels collecting spirits) into a vaultingly bonkers mythology marrying eastern and western brands of eco-mysticism in a glorious codswallop about cosmic animism, planetary souls, and "biotheric wave patterns" – all couched in the familiar metaphors of the cinema of HIV, with the infected heroine racing against time to complete her vaccine against the invading organisms before they infect our whole biosphere and give Gaia (who rather wonderfully turns up

in person at the end) a terminal dose. Needless to say, as in all great *anime*, megacities are totalled, planets smithereened, and the ending defies all western attempts at explaining what just happened, with or without the explanatory dialogue that sounds for all the world like uproariously bad subtitling ("With the hope of new life, has Gaia changed the phantom within?").

"This is all," lies Steve Buscemi's character wantonly, "beginning to make a creepy kind of sense." Happily, most of the film does nothing of the kind. The strongest moments seem to have come straight off a stream-of-consciousness storyboard of imagery; most of the clips seen in trailers and teasers turn out in fact to be extracts from Aki's copious and stunning dream sequences, whose epic planetscapes contrast rather regrettably with the real plot's drab subterranean *gris*.

The character animation is undeniably fascinating, though much more

heavily stylized and much less interested in photographic illusionism than the adroit PR has been willing to suggest. Indeed, it's at its least good when it's trying hardest for photo-realism; though the textures of skin, hair, and eyes are exquisite by the standards of anything that's gone before, more conspicuous still are the things even this level of digital sorcery can't yet quite do. Even with wall-to-wall motion capture, necks articulate oddly, and everybody seems to have these Tracy-brothers arms that don't respond to gravity correctly and swing unnaturally when they walk. And though the team are justly proud of their microblemished skin textures, the technology still can't do larger-scale wrinkling at all convincingly; everyone, even the 70-some Dr Sid, has these impossibly youthful and unpocked features set in masklike angelic perfection. This makes strong emotion a particular problem, because it's impossible to get



these perfect faces to screw up in anguish, leading to a rather west-of-Midway tendency for characters to express themselves facially by a kind of moist-eyed understatement. (Moist eyes they can do.)

Clearly Hironobu Sakaguchi's *Fantasy* team have taken this path for a mixture of technical and aesthetic reasons, partly to push the envelope and partly to try to sculpt a new, distinctive look for game characters animated large. But one consequence is to idealize the human form further towards impossibly flawless youth and comics-like fantasy physique, while losing much of the essential human nuance. Even with the remarkable Aki, the net result is an impossibly pretty heroine who can't act for bobbins.

She's very sweet, so long as she doesn't try to move around too much, but no film has ever laid out quite so much silly money for such a robotic lead actress. It's a lot to spend on the spectacle of a dog walking on its hind legs; but if you can see past the awkward visualization, Aki is a genuinely complex figure, a long way from the standard-issue butt-kicking digital pinup that might have been expected from a more mainland production. A figure of blurry mid-Pacific ethnicity (inspired by everybody's favourite Chinese-American voice talent Ming-Na Wen), she's significantly girlier and more vulnerable than western audiences like in their iconic movie babes, aligned with feminine narrative values of compassion, reconciliation, and spir-

itality that tense interestingly against the shoot-'em-up game genre and its heroically-proportioned males heaving guns the size of tree trunks.

The ending, in particular, breaks some fundamental rules of western film-narrative grammar in its interesting choice of survivors: just one of many off-balancing things about the project that may make it just a little too offshore for mainland audiences' comfort. But there's clearly gold in those islands, for those prepared to raise their eyes a bit further out there than Santa Monica.

By a synchronicity so perfect as to seem almost coincidental, just around the archipelago from Dr Hiro's digital creature shop, Hawaii has simultaneously been playing host to the mother of all digital monster franchises. *Jurassic Park III* is the first of its line to dispense altogether with foreign locations, along with such other wasteful fripperies as a title (a serial number is quite sufficient), Spielberg (this is a job for technicians, not expectation-raising bombastic visionaries), Michael Crichton and his onscreen mouthpiece ("Did you read Malcolm's book? Too preachy, and everything was chaos. It seemed like the guy was kinda high on himself"),

and a running time beyond 90 minutes. Time was when the creatures of Isla Nubar were lords of the earth, with resources lushly in abundance; but time was, and now the grasses rustle with smaller, nimbler predators.

III is a nervous little film, all too aware of the ticking of the evolutionary clock. Everything about it speaks of a terror of imminent extinction, of a declining titan's struggle to adapt and compete with the digital behemoths' faster, cuddlier evolutionary successors. Even poor Alan Grant has failed to find romance ("the last of my breed", he laments), and it's left to a cast of more reproductively-successful newcomers to renew their familial vows under his chastely avuncular guidance. Even within the propagative family, there's pessimism about the long-term prospects of success in parenting, with some striking early dalliance with mid-life male anxiety about being too boring and hopeless to hold on to your attractive wife and teen-turning son – though in the event the fleeting rivalry between pathetic real dad and cool surrogate dad (with trademark adventure hat) falls away as dorky dad makes contact with his inner hero and wins back, for now at least, the respect of his estranged family. But it can't wipe out the viewer's deep-down certainty that there is no way on earth that a character played by Tea Leoni will ever, in any movie universe, form a stable long-term romantic bond with a character played by William H. Macy. Sorry, but it's just genetics.

Paleontologically, the contribution of *III* to interpretation of the fossil record is the elevation of some modestly-respectable stuff about skull cavities and velociraptor vocalization into a

Jurassic Park III: Sam Neill, Téa Leoni, a tyrannosaurus and a spinosaurus – it is left to the reader to decide which ones are the actors.

Facing page: stills from *Final Fantasy: The Spirit Within*





Jurassic Park III: "...smarter than primates..." – the spinosaurus seems happy to get dinner out of a tin can...

logic-bending case for raptors as cunning antagonists capable of purposeful collaboration and convoluted jeopardy plotting. "They were smarter than dolphins or whales," Dr Grant insists in the set-up act; "they were smarter than *primates*... If it hadn't been for the catastrophic events which overtook them, there is every possibility raptors rather than humans would have been the dominant species on this planet." Quite how something with a brain the size of a cashew could be smarter than a chimp is a question none of Dr G's colleagues seems to think of asking, but by this stage of the series' life-cycle we've left the real-world debates about evolution and scientific ethics behind on another island entirely.

The real truth about our evolutionary history and our status as so-called dominant species is revealed in *Cats and Dogs* – on a purely technical level, perhaps the closest mammalian successor to the original *Jurassic Park*'s deft mix of digital, puppeteering and live-action effects. Much more than *Final Fantasy*, *Cats*

and *Dogs* is one of those films that seems to have been made primarily for the inarguable reason enshrined so memorably in the Stepford protocol: "Because We Can." Now that digital fur has advanced to the point where it's just about become possible to do a *JP* for domestic pet species, all that's needed is a storyline to show off the technology of photo-real anthropomorphism. On paper, a gadget-movie spy spoof sounds just the job: a genre just the other side of credible, combining action, comedy, and spectacle with whole-family appeal and parent-appealing PoMo ironics. In practice, though, it's an overcrowded genre with a lot of well-muscled competitors and a fair bit of uneasy political baggage. Whether they want to or not, spy movies can't avoid making a statement (sometimes satirical, more often scary) about the new world order, a subject on which *Cats and Dogs* is rather more interesting than it wants to be.

The natty premise of *Cats and Dogs* is a secret history of the world, according to which human domination is sustained only by a vast covert network of

highly-equipped canine operatives working tirelessly against the threat of moggie terrorism – humans having only displaced cats in "Ancient Ephypt" (caption *sic*) thanks to the intervention of man's selfless best friend. ("Humans being back on top, we took our natural place at their side.") So the difference between our side and theirs is that ours aren't interested in power for themselves, but merely in making the world safe for family life and for dogs to assume their natural surrogate role as soccer coaches when dad fails to deliver, as human dads invariably will, especially when played by the fugitive Jeff Goldblum doing his man-of-chaos routine. Misguided liberals might question the purpose of the doggy CIA after millennia of unchallenged hominid supremacy, particularly in the absence of any evidence of any kind of global feline power with the resources and organization of the canine underground, but the fact is that humans need unaccountable agencies running covert global operations outside government control in order to protect us from the enemy within and the tyrant without. The cold-nose war may be over, but vigilance is still needed to deal with the threat of the fur-faced Kims and Saddams: "We believe," announces the canine chief of staff, "that a *rogue feline* threatens all that we dogs have struggled to achieve."

Clearly between Them and Us there can be no peace, merely mutually armed assurance, and as in life the world of covert operations is man's best friend, if only we knew it, which of course we can't because then they'd have to kill us. As fun, it's a mixed success, sometimes quite witty, surprisingly tiresome in stretches, and hobbled by the inevitable comparison with the impossibly superior *Spy Kids*, some of whose set pieces are inadvertently homaged, to the human film's consistent advantage. The digital and mechanical puppeteers wrestle inconclusively with the problem of reconciling naturalism with physical expressiveness, neither mogs nor dogs being particularly designed by nature for visible emotional eloquence; and though the evil Mr Tinkles has his moments, the characterizations and dialogue aren't generally as engaging as they should be. Meanwhile, and back in what we like to delude ourselves is the real world, the notorious private-enterprise cloning labs and headline burglars Transgenic Pets of Syracuse, NY have already announced a two-year plan to implement Goldblum's mad-scientist master scheme of eliminating all pet allergy – but for cats, not for dogs. Whoever's really ruling the world, you have calls from LA on lines one through fifty-three.

Nick Lowe

Cats and Dogs Jeff Goldblum and Elizabeth Perkins with Mr. Tinkles (voiced by Sean Hayes)



The Cat

Zoran Zivkovic

Mr Oliver did not start visiting second-hand shops until after the death of his wife. Mrs Katerina had often visited such places, particularly during her latter years, and would occasionally bring something home, usually an ornament of some kind. He had never accompanied her, although she had often invited him to come along. He had a certain aversion to old things, especially ones that had previously belonged to other people. This was not shared by Mrs Katerina. She bought whatever she found pretty and not too expensive.

She had bought Oscar in much the same spirit. She had seen him at a pet shop, priced cheap as he was not pure-bred. The snow-white kitten with chestnut eyes had enchanted Mrs Katerina from first sight, though Mr Oliver had greeted Oscar's arrival with reserve. He was certainly not a cat-lover, although he had nothing against them. He would have said he was simply indifferent to cats.

At first he tried to have as little contact as possible with Oscar, considering the attention his wife lavished on the cat quite enough – more than enough, indeed. Sometimes he felt that she treated Oscar more like a child than a cat. She took meticulous care of all his needs, kept him neat and fastidiously clean, even gave him his own room, though he spent very little time there. In addition, she talked to the cat a lot, mainly in baby talk, which had aroused some misgivings in Mr Oliver, though of course he never remarked upon it.

Over time Mr Oliver and the cat evolved a truce. If they were unable to establish a closer relationship, at least they learned to put up with each other. Mr Oliver became used to the tomcat's presence in the house and was no longer bothered by his smell, his hair everywhere when he moulted, his habit of sharpening his claws on the upholstery, the compulsion to tear frantically about the house that seized him, without warning and for no apparent reason at least once a day, and the agitation that came over him should a queen come on call any-

where nearby.

For his part, Oscar stopped eyeing or sniffing suspiciously at Mr Oliver, as if at a shady stranger, and was happy to avoid any physical contact with him. Mrs Katerina tried briefly to bring them closer together, then gave up, seeing the futility of her efforts. She was nonetheless very careful to divide her affection evenly between them so that neither felt deprived.

The relationship between Mr Oliver and Oscar changed when Mrs Katerina first took to her bed, and shortly thereafter went into hospital. Mr Oliver had to take over the care of the tomcat. At first he had trouble coping and Oscar found it difficult to accept the change. But gradually Mr Oliver acquired skill at the basic things – preparing food and cleaning up after the cat – and Oscar became less distrustful.

Even so, when Mr Oliver brushed the cat, although he clearly enjoyed it, he did not purr in response, as he had with Mrs Katerina. This perturbed Mr Oliver a little. Trouble also arose when once a month he leashed the cat and took him for a walk in the park, to find the grass that helped his digestion. Mr Oliver always felt uneasy doing that, sure that many amazed and even reproachful eyes were on him.

But all this was bearable. The only thing Mr Oliver could not bring himself to do was talk to Oscar. Although he made several attempts, he felt foolish every time, as if he had been caught talking to himself, and fell silent after only a few words. It was even worse when he tried to babytalk the cat. It seemed hopelessly artificial and affected, as if Mr Oliver were adopting a persona entirely unsuited to his age.

As if affected by the same diffidence, Oscar meowed less and less. That had been his way of informing Mrs Katerina of his wishes, but he preferred to convey his needs to Mr Oliver by scratching, often suffering when

this was not noticed in time. The two of them were clearly condemned to mutual silence; their intimacy had reached a point beyond which neither could proceed.

When Mrs Katerina died, the question of what would become of Oscar was never even raised. It was, of course, out of the question for Mr Oliver to turn the cat out, even had he wished to do so. Unaccustomed to fending for himself, the cat would not survive very long in the street. Had he wanted to get rid of him, Mr Oliver would have preferred to consign the cat to a society for the protection of animals, or possibly return him to the store from which he had been bought. But Mr Oliver did not want this by any means. Without Oscar, he would be left completely alone in the large, empty apartment, and that thought filled him with horror. Perhaps he and the cat did not get along perfectly well, but now they needed each other. In any case, Katerina would never forgive him if he let Oscar go.

Mr Oliver's guilty conscience pressured him into visiting second-hand shops. Now it was too late, he realized he should not have refused Katerina's invitations to join her. Had he gone, they would have had many more pleasant moments together. How strange that one only began to value such things when they were beyond reach. He thought briefly of taking Oscar with him, at least occasionally – it seemed somehow fitting. Yet he refrained; animals were probably not allowed in such places, not even on a leash.

At first he shied away from actually entering junk shops. In his inexperience he imagined they must be like other stores, in which eager salespeople immediately accosted you. If that were to happen, he would find himself in an awkward situation, because he wasn't looking for anything in particular. Luckily, however, there was no such pressure. If he were addressed at all it would only be with a polite greeting, after which he would be left to poke around the vast jumble of small and large objects which crammed every available corner for as long as he liked.

His aversion towards old, second-hand things slowly started to fade. Picking at leisure through crowded shelves and glass showcases, he came to see the items on display through the eyes of his late wife: he saw the beauty in them. The age of an object had no effect on it, and his recent experience with death reminded him painfully that any ownership could endure but a short time.

Indeed, how could anyone own beauty? Who actually owned all those decorative little things that Mrs Katerina had brought home from junk shops over all those years? He did, presumably – but certainly not for long. If they had had children, he might take another view of the situation, but with no heirs he had no way of knowing what would happen to these objects after his death. It made no difference, nor should it. Soon afterwards, when he started to buy things he found pretty, he regarded none of them as his possessions. They would be with him only temporarily. All he had been given was a brief time in which to enjoy them.

He discovered beauty in the widest range of objects: the chipped ceramic figurine of a ballerina, a cracked

badge of honour, an incomplete set of tunic buttons, a worn-out brass pipe-stand, a pocket watch with half the big hand missing, a snuffbox whose lid that did not close properly, a rusted key which must once have opened an elaborate lock, a small set of lead soldiers with most of the paint chipped off, a wall barometer from which the mercury had leaked, a pile of sundry old coins, cutlery that might have been gilded at one time, a dented thimble inscribed with a Latin motto in cursive script, a bottle of lavender water, now dried out despite its ground-glass stopper, an empty monocle frame, a tea strainer with its handle bent slightly askew, an album partially filled with old, yellowed photographs of people no one would now recognize.

After bringing these things home, he would not immediately put them on the narrow black shelf with its many compartments, made to order for this special purpose. First, according to his wife's habit, he would give Oscar a chance to sniff them thoroughly in order to become acquainted with them; then he would spend long, patient hours at the kitchen table repairing, fixing, gluing, straightening, fastening, sewing, polishing and painting. In time he collected a wide assortment of tiny tools for such purposes and acquired skills he had never before possessed. When each item finally reached the shelf, it was in the best shape it could possibly be. Only once, during an especially tedious undertaking, did he wonder in amazement that the things Katerina had brought from second-hand shops had never needed any refurbishing.

Mr Oliver came across the music box by accident. He tripped over it, literally, when approaching a glass showcase in the corner of a junk shop in a suburb he had never previously visited. It was on the floor, partially covered by the long velvet drapes that framed the display window. He bent down and picked it up, fearful that he might have damaged it inadvertently with his foot. As the sudden, dull sound disturbed the silence, the shopkeeper, who had been engrossed in his accounts, stared inquisitively over his small, round glasses at his only customer.

In other circumstances, Mr Oliver would certainly not have bought the music box. It was too bulky to fit on the shelf in the living room. Worse, he concluded that he did not like it when he took a closer look. He did not mind that it was quite worn and most likely didn't work; probably he could remedy such defects. But he didn't see the spark of beauty that was crucial to him.

He doubted he had caused any additional damage to the music box when he tripped over it, but the dealer kept looking at him suspiciously, so he had no way out. Disinclined and unprepared to haggle, he simply went up to the counter and asked the price. When he was told, the price clearly included the dealer's experienced appraisal of a customer who was in a bind, but he did not try to bargain – he never bargained. He paid the amount without a word and waited for the music box to be wrapped.

A small problem arose in this regard. The shopkeeper, whose expression had relaxed into a smile once the money was in the cash register, had trouble finding anything large enough to hold the music box. He finally dis-

appeared behind the curtain that covered the entrance to the back of the store and brought out a large cardboard box originally intended for boots. He then saw his esteemed customer out with the bow and broad smile proper to the occasion.

When he got home, Mr Oliver was still uncertain about what to do with the music box. He could put it away somewhere and forget it, but that made no sense. If he hadn't wanted it, the best thing would have been to chuck it into the first garbage container he came across after he left the junk shop. He was certainly not the type to cling tenaciously to old things when they were certain never to be used again. Since he had already brought it home, why not try to fix it up a little? Maybe it would grow on him with time.

He went into the kitchen where he did his repairs, took the music box out of its wrapping and placed it on the table. As Oscar always did when something new was brought home, he came at once to sniff it, jumping first to the chair, thence to the table. Mrs Katerina would not have allowed this, but Mr Oliver had relaxed almost all her restrictions. Even when he wanted to prohibit Oscar from doing something, he usually hesitated because he didn't know how to go about it.

Mr Oliver expected Oscar to go up to the musical device, but for some reason the cardboard box attracted him instead. He sniffed it carefully all over, then climbed inside, pulling himself under the half-open lid. When the tip of his tail disappeared the lid went down with him, so he was completely enclosed. This did not disturb Mr Oliver. Oscar often found his way into various inaccessible places and always got out easily, without anyone's help. All he had to do here was rise up a little and lift the lid with his head.

There was a bit of scratching and commotion inside and then everything went silent. Oscar was obviously hiding, something cats do when they think they're in a safe environment. He would come out when he got bored. Mr Oliver returned to the music box. He looked it over carefully, then took a flannel rag and started to clean it. To judge by the thick layer of dust, no one had used it in a long time.

After cleaning the outside, Mr Oliver grasped the white porcelain handle that wound the device. Quite a bit of effort was needed to turn it. From inside the box came the squeaking of gears and springs that had not been oiled recently. He had to turn the handle very slowly, so that nothing inside would get stuck or break. It took him quite a while, but he was in no hurry. Undoubtedly it would take considerable effort to make the music box work, and the question was whether he could handle such a job. It was one thing to fix up simple objects on the outside, quite another to repair a complex device like this. After all, he was not a mechanical engineer.

He had just decided that nothing would happen when to his surprise the mechanism started to emit sounds. The music was stiff, scratchy and broken, but he could make out the basic melody. It sounded gay and enthusiastic, with a lively rhythm – a polka, perhaps. Mr Oliver

thought he had heard it somewhere before, but since he had no ear for and little understanding of music, he could not recognize it. But all this suddenly lost importance when the lid to the boot box at the other end of the table started to rise.

The head that appeared was not Oscar's. It seemed somehow smaller, more like that of a queen than a tom-cat; in addition there was not a single white hair on it. Grey, brown and black colours competed discordantly for supremacy, and jade-green eyes stood out against this mainly dark background. The cat examined her surroundings inquisitively for several moments, showing no interest at all in the fixed stare of Mr Oliver, either accepting his presence as part of the furniture or not noticing him at all.

Then she slipped out from under the lid and onto the table. The cat looked about the kitchen briefly, stretched after being cramped in the box, and jumped first onto the chair, thence onto the floor. Mr Oliver watched her without moving as she headed towards the dining room. He had the impression that she brushed against his leg as she passed him, but he hadn't felt any touch, probably because of the confused state he was in. The cat moved lithely, like Oscar, although somehow in a softer and more feminine manner. With brisk steps she soon reached the door which was ajar and disappeared into the next room.

Mr Oliver hesitated several seconds before starting after her. He was beset by the desire to peer into the boot box to see what had happened to Oscar. He didn't do so; not only because it was not the most important thing at the moment but also because he shuddered at what he might see if he lifted the lid. Instead, he headed towards the dining room, pursued by lively sounds from the music box. He did not open the door all the way when he reached it, although he already had his hand on the door-knob. He stopped in front of it: from the other side came something that should positively not have been there – the murmur of voices.

He tried to recognize them, but the piercing music behind his back interfered. Several people were talking at the same time, and the squeaky, clamorous voices of children and their noisy laughter rose above it all. Mr Oliver stared at the door in front of him, bewildered, not knowing what to do. The reasonable part of his mind told him to open the door and find out what was going on in the dining room. But another part, deeply hidden, feverishly held him back, insisting the contrary: that he close the door at once, by no means look inside, get away as soon as possible, even flee somewhere.

When he finally started to open the door, slowly and hesitantly, he did so only because he believed he would never forgive himself if he didn't do so. In addition, something in the indistinct voices from the dining room was calming, and even more than that: familiar. He could not determine exactly what it was, but what he felt was enough to convince him that nothing bad would happen.

In the dining room he found the oval table laid for lunch. Five chairs were occupied, with two adults and three chil-

dren sitting and eating. It was a family meal, its atmosphere gay and relaxed, because there were no guests whose presence would require formal behaviour. Not a single head turned towards the uninvited visitor standing in astonished confusion at the kitchen door. He stayed there, immobile, like an invisible ghost.

His eyes first stopped at Katerina. He had some pictures of her from when she was young, of course, but the only place she remained as lively as she looked now was in his memory, although he couldn't remember her hair like this. Next to her was the youngest of the three children, a little girl with freckles and long, dark, curly hair, wearing a stained bib. Her mother repeatedly brought spoonfuls of soup from a bowl, saying each time that it wasn't hot as she blew unnecessarily at the thick, red liquid, while the little girl tried, through a babbling string of words, to postpone the inevitable as long as possible.

The boys sitting on either side of their father were twins, three or perhaps four years older than their sister. They wore identical clothes and had very short hair. The one on the right was recounting, with a lot of giggling, one of his and his brother's recent larks, trying to keep everyone's attention by raising his voice. He continued to eat all the while, so his father had to quiet him down and remind him not to talk with his mouth full. The other boy was eating in silence, waiting for the chance when no one was watching to drop a bit of food to the tortoiseshell cat standing by his chair.

Feeling a swarm of needles land on the back of his head, Mr Oliver finally looked at the father. What struck him first was how different he looked with a moustache. At one time, soon after he married, he had started one, but Katerina hadn't been very pleased with it, so he had abandoned the idea. Now he concluded that it didn't look that bad on him. It lent a certain seriousness to the young face, such as was proper to the head of the family. The glasses also contributed to this effect, although Mr Oliver found them less appealing. He was proud that his sight was still quite good, despite his advanced age.

When Katerina got up, took the soup tureen from the table and headed towards the kitchen, the old man standing at the door, captivated by the impossible sight before him, was startled out of his paralysis. He couldn't just stand there, blocking her way, but what should he do? Complicated questions, which he had suppressed until that moment, started to appear everywhere, finding no answers, as the young woman drew inexorably closer.

And then, as if things were not hopeless enough, behind Mr Oliver's back came the sudden sound of a sharp, metallic rattle followed by a high-pitched gasp. His nerves taut, he jerked round, but nothing was happening in there. The music box had stopped playing, either because the spring had wound down or (more likely, given the squeaky wheeze that had just echoed) because some part of the neglected mechanism had finally collapsed.

Mr Oliver quickly turned his head towards the dining room, almost expecting to collide with Katerina, but no one was coming towards him any longer. There was no mother carrying a soup tureen. There was no daughter who didn't like hot soup, no son who liked to talk while

he ate, no second son who liked to sneak food to the cat. There was no young father with a moustache and glasses heading the table at the family meal. The large room gaped empty and quiet, just as it had for so many years.

Mr Oliver continued to stand at the door to the room, eyes staring out of focus, until a new noise came from the kitchen. It was considerably softer, so this time he did not have to turn around so suddenly. Out of the boot box appeared first a whiskered muzzle, then a white head. Oscar stayed like that for a while, as if wondering whether to go back inside his nice hiding place or leave it. Finally the lid rose a bit more and he glided onto the table.

Even before Mr Oliver reached Oscar, he had come to a decision. He would not be able to repair the music box after all. Better not even to try. It might well not be fixable, and even if it were, the repairs might cost more than the price of a new music box – and in any case, he had no desire to own one. He put it back in the cardboard box, put the box under his arm and left his apartment, followed by Oscar's inquisitive eyes.

When he appeared at the door to the junk shop carrying the box, the owner eyed him suspiciously, sensing trouble. He was just about to tell the customer, with a suitably implacable expression on his face, that items purchased in his store could not be returned (as was clearly stated in the framed sign on the wall) when Mr Oliver interrupted him with a movement of his hand.

After the shopkeeper found that he was not expected to return the money he had been paid, only to take back the music box without any compensation, he wrinkled his brow briefly, wondering what traps might be lurking behind such a strange offer. Being able to find none, he finally agreed, trying to insinuate by his tone of voice that he was doing so unwillingly, and as a special favour. His conviction that he had made a very good deal was only slightly dented when the customer left the shop, with the bow and the broad smile of one who has got by far the best of the bargain.

Immediately on returning home, Mr Oliver recounted to Oscar his experiences with the second-hand dealer. The tomcat listened attentively, not interrupting him with superfluous meowing. That would start to happen somewhat later, as he listened to other stories, first restrained and shy, and then increasingly uninhibited, as the voice of the old man with whom he lived gradually softened, on its way to becoming baby talk.

Translated from the Serbian by Alice Copple-Tosic
Translation edited by Christopher Gilmore

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Zoran Zivkovic lives in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, where he runs a small publishing company named Polaris. He is now *Interzone's* most frequently-published foreign-language contributor. The above new piece is the third in a cycle of subtly interconnected fantasies – to be called *Seven Touches of Music*. The stories may be read in any order.

Indecisive Weapons

Tony Ballantyne

Marcus Westerby, currently sitting cross-legged on his dining-room floor, did not agree with those who thought that he was overly critical.

"No, I don't think I am being unreasonable," he said. "I have the advert here and it clearly states that the table and chairs would be hand-painted to the *highest quality*..."

The incoming call symbol flashed in the corner of the viewscreen.

"... excuse me Kevin, I'll have to put you on hold."

"Yes, but..."

Marcus stretched up to the console and switched to the next call. The acne-scarred face of the young man was replaced by the no-visual banner. An electronic voice spoke.

"Mr Marcus J. Westerby?"

"Speaking." Marcus picked up another videomag and began to leaf through it.

"Good Morning from Thor-Summerville Securities. This message is to inform you that a limited-radius sub-nuclear warhead has been targeted at you and will enter critical vicinity in two minutes 56 seconds, at my mark. Mark."

"What?" Marcus had turned over the page of the videomag before the words caught up with his thoughts. He felt a cold little giggle deep in his stomach. "What did you say?"

"Good morning from Thor-Summerville Securities. This message is to inform you that a limited-radius sub-nuclear warhead..."

"No, I got that. Who are you?"

"Thor-Summerville Securities..." There was a fraction of a second's pause as the AI software picked up on the context of the question and then, another voice spoke: "Our services have been provided as part of your employer's Health Insurance scheme. They were bought under an umbrella package of cheap but mostly unnecessary services used to pad out your policy."

A click and then: "Two minutes and 22 seconds until the warhead enters critical vicinity on my mark. Mark."

Marcus prided himself on his rationality. Three deep breaths; 24 seconds of his remaining time on earth, were

all that it took for him to adapt to his new circumstances.

"Okay. I understand the situation. Now tell me, who instigated this attack?"

"I'm sorry, discovery of such data is not covered by your insurance."

"What? Well, why not?"

"Because that sort of thing costs a lot more, Marcus. One minute and 45 seconds on my mark. Mark."

Marcus walked from the kitchen into the tiny hall of his flat and picked up his console. His car was parked just outside the door.

"Should I run?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, discovery of such data is not covered by your insurance."

"Fine."

He tapped a button on the console to break the connection and opened the front door. The traffic was light at this time of the morning, it would take ten seconds to get into the car and start it, nought to 100 kilometres per hour in another eight seconds... As he opened the car door his console chimed.

"Will you accept an incoming priority call?" it asked.

Marcus slid into the driver's seat and pressed his thumb on the ignition pad. He was spinning the wheel around to pull out of the parking space as the engine was still starting.

"Put it through," said Marcus calmly as he slid the car to the centre of the road and began to accelerate. Away down the street a grey cat hesitated at the kerb, before turning and running at the violence of Marcus's approach. The console clicked and a human voice spoke.

"Good Morning, Marcus. Verbatim Securities. We have noted your predicament and would like to offer our services. As a goodwill gesture we are prepared to offer, free of charge, the information that the warhead from which you are currently attempting to escape is targeted, not at your property, but rather upon your bio signature. You won't be able to outrun it in a car, I'm afraid."

Marcus spun around a corner onto a main street and

accelerated.

"Fine," he said levelly. "Do you have any better ideas?"

"We do. Would you like to employ our services? The price will be 10,042 credits."

"Ten thousand and forty-two..." The figure sounded familiar. Realization dawned. "But that's all the money I have in savings!"

"We know. Hence the offer."

"That's unfair!"

"In 55 seconds that missile enters your vicinity. Do you really want to spend that time discussing business ethics?"

Marcus relaxed the foot on the accelerator and allowed the car to slow down, his hands tapping on the wheel in frustration as he did so. He was beaten, and he knew it.

"Very well. What are you offering?"

"To remove the current threat to your security."

"I want to know who's responsible."

"That will cost extra. Do you wish to discuss terms?"

"No."

Never bargain under pressure, thought Marcus. Once the current threat was neutralized, there must be other firms offering better rates. He slowed the car to a halt and got out.

"Okay. I accept your terms."

"We'll give it a go, then. I hope you have left us enough time..."

"What? You implied..."

But the screen had gone dead. There was a pause that gradually lengthened. Marcus found he was counting seconds under his breath. Twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five... How long would this take? He scanned the sky for any sign of an incoming missile. It was a fresh October morning. The wind stirred the brown plane leaves that flopped and grasped like hands in the gutters. A pale sun was reflected in the plate-glass windows of the little shops that lined the street. Everything looked so peaceful and ordinary. Marcus could not believe that barely five minutes ago he had been sitting on his kitchen floor, complaining about his badly-painted dining-room suite. A flicker of movement caught his eye. He jumped, then relaxed as he realized he had seen a pigeon flapping to a creaking halt on a nearby rooftop. When the voice came from the console he nearly dropped it, such was his fright.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Marcus."

A woman's voice this time, a call-desk voice with a faint south-western lilt.

"No problem," said Marcus dryly, though he was shaking inside.

"We are pleased to inform you that the current threat to your security has been neutralized." There was a little laugh. "It says here that whoever bought that warhead didn't think to purchase a guaranteed-delivery window on the missile that was intended to deliver it. We have bought out another, higher-priority warhead and have redirected the missile to Dinan airport, Brittany. It can sit there on the tarmac for the next three days until your persecutor's lease runs out."

"What?" said Marcus. "That doesn't make any sense to me."

The woman gave another little laugh. "Really? It says

here that you have a General Awareness rating of nine point three. With that sort of number you should know something about the way the world works. Anyway, what it boils down to is this. Modern missiles are expensive, highly sophisticated vehicles. Few people can afford to blow them up along with the warhead. Nowadays you lease a missile from a company like Avis, or Eurodollar or the US Army. It will deliver the warhead and then fly away before it gets caught in the blast. Even so, missile hire is still expensive, so they are often used to deliver several warheads to different targets in one journey. We simply bought out the lease on one of the other warheads and..."

"I get the picture," snapped Marcus. He suddenly felt very tired and irritable. He wanted to go home and find out what was happening.

"Anyway. Verbatim Securities would like to thank you for your custom. Your fee has been deducted from your savings account. I hope you will think of using us again in the event of mechanized attack."

"I hope it won't come to that," said Marcus.

The connection was closed. Marcus climbed back into his car and gave a sigh of relief. The last few minutes had been fraught. He turned up the vibration unit in his seat to relieve the tension in his shoulders and began to drive home. First he would have a hot shower, and then he would begin to contact a few security firms to find out what was going on.

His console chimed. "Would you like to accept a message from DT Couriers?"

Marcus glanced at the console involuntarily. "Put them on," he said uneasily.

An electronic voice spoke up. "Mr Marcus Westerby? DT Couriers. Would you be at home this afternoon to accept a delivery? Package contents are..." A brief pause, and then another, slightly different, voice spoke. "One limited-radius sub-nuclear warhead." Another pause and then back to the first voice. "Thank you."

Marcus groaned and switched off the console.

"No. I don't know who is targeting me! That is what I want you to find out!"

Marcus gripped his coffee mug in frustration. The fact that someone was trying to kill him filled him with understandable fear: it was the uncertainty of why anyone should try to do so that made his stomach shrivel to a tiny ball, that made his muscles tighten with a nervous energy that made him want to run shouting and screaming around his tiny flat.

Why him? Marcus was well aware that his precise manner and insistence on high standards in everyone and everything did not endear him to many, but surely that was no reason to want him dead? And not just dead, but gone: completely removed from the universe. He had looked up Limited-Radius Sub-Nuclear Warheads on a subscription info-bank. They were nasty little weapons, designed to penetrate a person at stomach level before detonating in a sub-nuclear reaction restricted to a sphere just larger than the human body. Everything within that sphere would... well. Marcus did not want to think about it. Suffice to say that Marcus would be torn

apart and reduced to his absolute basic constituents. And then the reaction would eliminate those constituents from space/time... One thing was sure; you had to really dislike someone to fire one of those mothers at them.

He scrolled down his console to the next security company on the list and established a link. To his surprise, a human answered.

"Hello there. John Brook Securities. I was waiting for you to get in touch with me, Marcus."

John Brook wore a striped shirt and had slicked back his dark hair. His booming voice and beaming smile projected an air of assured confidence.

"Really?" said Marcus dryly. "I'm pleased someone's keeping abreast of events."

"Well, thank you," said John Brook. "I have to say, that warhead has come as a great surprise to everyone in my line of work. The AIs are talking of nothing else."

"I'm sure they are. Can you help me?"

The view on the console pulled back to take in John Brook spreading his hands wide as he gave a lopsided smile. Marcus could see a small office packed with tiny, grey boxes connected by wide, rainbow-patterned ribbon cables. Heavy-duty electronic security equipment. Marcus was impressed despite himself. When John Brook's reply came, it was full of sincerity.

"Of course we can help you. We're going to have to find out who's targeting you, of course. Once that's done we'll be better placed to neutralize the threat. No problem. There is the question of payment, however."

"Go on," said Marcus.

"Eight thousand credits. I know you haven't got that sort of money any longer, but a loan can be arranged secured against the value of your car. I have all the agreements to hand. All I need is your say-so to proceed. So, what do you say, Marcus? Do we have your go ahead?"

Eight thousand credits. Marcus was in no position to argue, and John Brook knew it. He would have spent the last half hour running credit checks on Marcus, working out to the penny how much Marcus could afford. No wonder he was waiting for Marcus to call.

"Okay," said Marcus, with an air of resignation. "You're hired."

John Brook beamed. "I was so confident that you'd say that I've had my hottest AI running on this problem for the past ten minutes."

He paused, a faint frown descending on his tanned features as he stared into Marcus's kitchen. "Just one thing, Marcus. Why are you sitting on the floor?"

Marcus gave a smile that was entirely devoid of warmth. "Someone tried to fob me off with a second-rate dining-room suite. Take my current seating position as an example of my refusal to accept second-rate service."

John Brook beamed. "A forceful man. I'm sure we'll get on well, Marcus." He gave another frown. "Just a moment Marcus, one of the AIs has located your aggressors. Hold on a sec..." John Brook's forehead creased as he read a screen just out of view. "Here we are. It's a small village in India called Jamgi. Jamgi is located in Andhra Pradesh, it says here. They've pledged 80% of their income over the next 25 years to pay off a mortgage

secured against the warhead they have fired at you."

"Jamgi? I've never heard of the place. Why are they picking on me?"

John gave an expansive shrug. "I have no idea. The AIs are still working on that. The big question is, do you want to take countermeasures?"

"Countermeasures?"

"Uhuh. Fire a missile back. You could just about to afford one big enough to wipe them out."

"But I've never heard of Jamgi. Why should I want to do that?"

John looked confused. "You did hear me when I told you that they fired the missile at you, didn't you?"

"Well, yes."

John looked relieved. "Oh, good. I thought the stress was getting to you. Well, what are you going to do when you have spent all your money neutralizing the current threat, only to find they've lobbed another missile at you?"

Marcus frowned. "Wouldn't firing a missile be illegal?" he asked.

John shook his head. He leant back in his chair, clasping his hands behind his head and began to recite what sounded like a well-rehearsed speech.

"The Morrison-Suzuki agreement of 2018 established the right of world citizens to bear arms. The case of *Marriner v Paraguay* in 2019 established the right for those citizens to retaliate against acts of unprovoked aggression on the grounds of self-defence."

Marcus took a sip of coffee without tasting it. John continued to press his point.

"So, as you can see, it's not only legal, but it's an accepted fact of life. Get your retaliation in fast. Now I've got a friend who can get you some top-of-the-range equipment at rock-bottom prices. The very best stuff. You fire one of these penis substitutes off and you know that someone is going to get..."

"How much?" interrupted Marcus.

John clasped his hands together and leant forward. "I like your style, Marcus. You are a man who comes straight to the point. Well, it's not cheap, I'm afraid. You're going to have to sell your house to cover the cost."

"My house? I'm not going to do that!"

John held his hands palm upwards. He arched his eyebrows and gave a half shrug. "Well, it's your choice, of course, but we are talking the very best in custom high-density reaction electronics here. You take this option and you know you are secure against future attack. You don't, and you could spend the rest of your life and your money fending off doodlebugs."

Marcus was silent. He had no choice, and he knew that John Brook knew it. He hated the feeling of powerlessness.

John Brook gave his sincere smile. "Come on, Marcus, I can see that you are an intelligent man. You can see my point, can't you? You're going to say 'Yes', aren't you? Come on, admit it. I've got all the documentation here. What do you say? Shall I go for it? Just a nod of the head. Just one. There we go. Good man. Good decision. Okay, I'll just hit the button, and there you are. Your warhead is despatched."

Marcus smiled weakly. He drained the rest of his cof-

fee and rocked backwards and forwards on his heels. John Brook looked down at a screen as he continued.

"It says here that your warhead has been placed on a guaranteed missile with five others. The guaranteed means that your missile must be delivered to its target at a specified time. It will hit Jamgi in exactly three hours and three minutes."

"Three hours? But their warhead is due to be delivered here in two!" He glanced at a screen. "One hour and 55 minutes now."

John shrugged. "I'm sorry, Marcus. That was all we could afford on your budget. Now, I think you should go and stay with a friend."

"Why? Do you think that might help me avoid the delivery of the warhead?"

"No. That's now my house you're sitting in."

Helen was just pulling on her coat as Marcus arrived at her house. The sight of the strained expression on her brother's face was enough for her to call work and tell them she wouldn't be in that afternoon. She led Marcus into the lounge and offered him tea, cannabis and gin. Marcus shook his head and sat down on the sofa. Somewhere overhead he could hear loud music streaming from the room of his niece.

"What's happened?" asked Helen.

Marcus quickly explained the situation. His sister listened without interruption, frowning thoughtfully. When he had finished, she spoke.

"Okay. How long do we have remaining?"

"One hour and five minutes."

"It takes 15 minutes to get to my house from yours. That leaves 25 minutes unaccounted for. Where were you during that time?"

"Thinking about what to do. I didn't want to put you at risk. Trouble is, I couldn't think of anyone else who knew how to react in a crisis."

"Thank you. Okay. We've got to get you out of the area. Put a bit more time between you and that missile. I'll get onto the airport. Book several flights to different destinations, all departing at roughly the same time."

"And I'll choose one at random. Good idea." Marcus beamed with pride at his sister's quick wit.

Marcus's console chimed. Brother and sister exchanged glances. Marcus took a deep breath and accepted the call.

"Good evening, Mr Westerby. This is DT Couriers speaking. We note you have changed your location. We are just calling to check that you will be there in 25 minutes time to accept your delivery."

Marcus's blood ran cold. Helen rose to her feet and moved swiftly out of the room.

"Twenty-five minutes?" said Marcus to the woman on the console screen. "I thought I had over an hour left."

"DT Couriers prides itself on its speed and efficiency. There was a delay in Sussex due to a faulty road liner. Rather than have your package arrive late, we have paid for it to be transported to Middleton via Hyper Dart. Now, will you be at your current location in 25 minutes time?"

Marcus rolled his eyes in disbelief. "Of course I won't be here," he said. "You're bringing me a bomb."

Marcus placed a hand on his forehead and slumped forward. The woman's expression froze. She glanced to the side and then leant closer to the camera.

"Look, I don't like this any better than you do," she muttered. "But our firm accepts contracts from many military concerns. It wouldn't look good to them if we picked and chose who we sent their bombs to." She glanced to the side again. Marcus noticed the dark roots in her platinum-blond hair, the fine lines around her eyes that gave a sudden human aspect to her face. "I shouldn't say this, but if I were you I'd ditch your console and start running. It will make it harder for us to find you."

Marcus nodded weakly. The woman sat back and assumed a businesslike pose.

"Okay, Mr Westerby. I'll tick the box to say that receiver would not give intended location for package receipt. Well, thank you. DT Couriers hope you will remember that; whilst you strive to reach your chosen destination in life, only we can guarantee that, if we say it will get there, it will get there."

The picture faded, leaving only the badly-worded company slogan behind. Marcus rose and walked swiftly into the hall where Helen stood waiting.

"If you wait two minutes I could make you some sandwiches. You might be hungry later."

"That's okay," said Marcus. "I'll need all the time I have."

"You haven't got time to make the airport. Kelly will run you to the International Train Terminus." His niece sat on the stairs, hurriedly pulling on her boots. "You can catch a train from there to nearly anywhere in the world. I've transferred 500 credits to your account. That's all I can afford, I'm afraid."

"That will be fine." He suddenly looked embarrassed. "Thanks, Sis," he said.

Helen gave a wry grin. "You haven't called me Sis for years." She gave him a kiss on the cheek. "You still can't think why that Indian village is after you?" she said.

"Not a clue," he replied. He gave a shrug and opened the door. His console, already abandoned on the hall table, chimed. They both looked at it.

"Answer it," said Helen. "It might be important."

"Last time," said Marcus. He accepted the call.

A stranger's face appeared on the screen. A greasy, balding man with too many chins.

"Marcus Westerby? I'm Phil Herring, reporter. Would you like to comment on the attack made on you by the village of Jamgi?"

"I'm sorry, I'm in a hurry."

Phil Herring spoke quickly as he saw Marcus's hand reaching to break the connection.

"Come on, Marcus. Is it worth dying over a dinner table?"

Marcus froze. His sister looked at him and frowned. Phil Herring smiled.

"I thought I might be the first to reach you. It's just been broadcast on the web. The people of the village of Jamgi weren't too happy with you rejecting their workmanship. They're taking revenge."

"What?" said Helen. "But that's ridiculous."

Phil Herring smiled at her. "It might be ridiculous," he

said. "That depends on how we report the news. My editor thinks this is a great chance to highlight the plight of the poor. You know, the rich First World buying the fruits of the labour of the Third World for a few pennies. Me, I think it's a mistake to take that point of view. Most of our viewers like their clothes and their electrical goods made cheaply, and they don't want to be reminded that this means employing children for long, long hours at a pittance of a wage."

He coughed, and his glistening chins wobbled. "But then again, who cares what I think?" he continued. "I'm not due to retire in two years time after a career spent breaking up marriages by reporting long-forgotten sexual mistakes. No. No one's going to be convinced by my opinion. Unless, of course, I've got something that will give my point of view some credibility. Like say, the inside, personal story on the missile attack, told exclusively to me by the innocent target himself."

Marcus opened his mouth to say something pithy, but the screen flickered. John Brook's grinning face took Phil Herring's place.

"Whew, close call there, eh Marcus? Well, here's the cavalry to your rescue. Your contract with us includes protection from the media. I've got an AI working on a statement for you at this very moment."

"Oh good," said Marcus weakly.

"No problem," said John Brook. He glanced at a screen to his side for a moment. "Hey, listen. You've got just over 19 minutes and counting. If I were you I'd start running. We can continue this conversation in the car."

Marcus ran to the road, the console clutched tightly in his hand. His niece, Kelly, was already behind the wheel of a green electric runabout, drinking from an open can of soda. She resealed the top and threw it behind her.

"Strap yourself in," she said.

Marcus was pushed back in his seat as Kelly accelerated down the road. He tried to steady the console so that he could see John Brook.

"Whew! Who have you got driving you there? We may have a job for her if she's interested."

Kelly snorted and spun the wheel, sending them around a corner. Marcus was flung into the door. "Work for Security?" she muttered. "I don't think so. Fascists." She accelerated up the next street.

"Never mind that," said Marcus, trying to regain his balance. "Tell me about this village. What's this about my dining table?"

John Brook looked a little embarrassed. "You know, my AIs should have found this first, they had all the clues. It's all over the newscasts. Apparently the main source of employment for the people of the region around Jamgi is a large processing centre. Objects as diverse as machine casing, chinaware, toys and furniture are shipped there from around the world to be hand-painted. Your dining table and chairs were advertised as hand-painted, weren't they? The villagers would have been responsible for painting on all those tiny little matchstick figures that are so fashionable at the moment."

Kelly spun the car around another corner and

slammed on the brakes. Someone sounded a horn.

"And this missile is all due to hurt feeling because I rejected their table?" shouted Marcus incredulously.

John Booth nodded his head diplomatically. "Well, yes, but if you think about it, you might see their point of view. They work for about a credit a week, the paint they use is poisonous over the long term, the women who are employed to do the intricate detail are sent blind after a few years concentrating on the fine strokes they make with their brushes. It may just be a faulty table to you, but it's a lifetime of poverty to them. Sending your kids out to work seven days a week with compulsory overtime. I don't know..."

He sat for a moment, gazing at the ceiling in contemplative silence. "Anyway. And then some security company offers Jamgi the chance to get even. Make an example of someone in the hope that the world will sit up and take note of what's going on. Maybe think twice about what they are doing..." John Booth's voice tailed off in admiration. "I only wish I'd thought of it first."

Marcus gave a humourless laugh. "I bet you do. It wouldn't be to help those people though, would it? It would all be about making money."

"Partly about making money."

Marcus opened his mouth to reply, but the words froze in his mouth. Kelly had sent them skidding around the corner that led to the station. Travelling in the opposite direction was a large van painted in familiar green and yellow colours. A DT Couriers' van. His heart stood still as he saw the woman sitting in the cab next to the driver point in his direction.

"Oh hell," he whispered.

"They're in the one-way system, Uncle Marcus," said Kelly. "It will take them a while to turn that van around. Run into the station and jump on the first train you see. You should get away."

She accelerated all the way along the road that led up to the grey stone building of the International Terminus, only slamming on the brakes at the last possible moment.

"Straight through that door. Good luck." She gave Marcus a bright smile.

"Thank you," he said, leaping from the car. He looked up the road for the DT Couriers' van, expecting to see it already bearing down upon him. To his relief, the street was empty. He turned and ran into the station. John Brook's voice sounded in his ears as he dashed across the wide marble space of the concourse.

"Marcus! There is an International Express to Munich due to leave in one minute's time. I've got a backdoor into the signalling software. I can keep it delayed until you board it."

"Thank you," gasped Marcus.

"No problem. It's on platform eleven. Go to your left," "I see it."

"Marcus, one more thing. Ditch your console. They will be tracking it. You can call me from a public booth once you are on the train."

"Okay."

He saved the rest of his breath for running. There was a green waste bin just by the edge of the platform, empty

brown burger sacks spilling over the side. He threw the console towards it. Marcus dashed through a door into the cool, grey cavern of the station proper.

The International Express was a long, white, flexible plastic tube that took on a pearly sheen beneath the high, harsh fluorescent lights. Its doors closed as Marcus boarded.

He gave a sigh of relief as the train began to pull out of the station. Large square pillars covered in a mosaic of yellow and blue tiles slid past the window. He staggered down a swaying carriage until he found an empty tartan upholstered seat to flop into. The other passengers eyed him from behind their papers, noticing his very apparent relief. Marcus didn't care. He looked around the carriage and gave a huge smile. Stuffed into a pouch set in the back of the seat before him was a range of magazines, and, joy of joys, a refreshments menu. Marcus pulled it out and began to look for the whisky.

"Marcus Westerby?"

Marcus felt his stomach plunge with fear. He knew the worst even before he turned to see the green and yellow uniform of the courier.

An attractive young woman, with red bobbed hair. She gave a delightful smile.

"It's a good job the road to the freight loading bays was clear," she said. "If not, I'd never have seen you running for this train and I'd have missed you. Still, never mind that now. If we say it will get there, it will get there."

She held out a tiny green and yellow cardboard box.

It was a lot smaller than Marcus had expected.

"... and that's why I say to you, don't be too quick to disparage the quality of the workmanship on that vase. The cost to you is a lot less than it was to the people who made it."

The man holding the vase gave a smile. "It's a nice story, but I still don't think I'm going to buy it."

"It's not a story, and I should know, because I am Marcus Westerby."

Marcus puffed out his chest as he pointed to his salesperson's badge.

The man gave an amused grin that twisted into a look of cunning. "Okay, how did you escape the missile, then?"

Marcus frowned in annoyance. "There never was any risk from the missile. Didn't you listen? In order to buy it,

the villagers took out a mortgage secured against the value of the missile. The mortgage company would never have allowed the villagers to destroy their only asset. I'd have spotted that myself if I wasn't so nervous at the time."

The man gave a nod, conceding the point. "Oh, I see. So it was all a bluff. Quite clever, really. A great way to get publicity without anyone getting hurt."

"Not really," said Marcus. "You're forgetting my missile. It landed on Jamgi one and a half hours after I got on that train."

"Oh."

"So, they lost their lives, I lost my home, my savings and my job, and five years of liberty. The prosecution successfully argued that I wasn't acting in self-defence, as there was no actual threat to me. The only people who really came out ahead were the security companies. They had us stitched up left, right and centre."

"Isn't it always the same? Still, maybe lessons will be learned."

"Maybe," said Marcus. "I don't know. Mostly I think that was just a one-off. It couldn't happen again. But sometimes I wake up at night and I think..."

His voice tailed away, and he remembered where he was. A shabbily-dressed man in shabby little shop, struggling to pay off his debts and climb back into society. He held up the vase so that the intricate brushwork on the picture of the tiger could be seen in the light.

"So, what do you think?" he said. "Three weeks work went into this vase. Some woman sacrificed a little more of her eyesight to get that level of detail into the fur. It's amazing when you think of it."

The man took the vase again and looked at it from several different angles. Eventually he handed it back.

"No. I don't think so," he said. "The tiger still looks as if it is squinting."

There was a chiming noise. Marcus and the man looked at each other. After a moment, the man spoke.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Was that your console or mine?"

Tony Ballantyne last appeared here with "Single-Minded" (issue 162), "A New Beginning" (issue 163) and his two ingenious "Restoring the Balance" pieces (issues 167 and 168). He lives with his wife in Oldham, Lancashire, and has recently completed a science-fiction novel.



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The Yellow Rose of Texas

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The predicaments of the television critic are easy to describe, but much more difficult to resolve. The central one is that, where book and film critics have publication or release dates around which to work, the television critic only has transmission dates, and an eclectic audience that is hostile to spoilers.

So when exactly should the TV critic publish a notice of a programme? After the first showing of the first episode of a series? This is often precluded because many popular fantastic fiction shows are broadcast first in the USA, and only subsequently in the UK, first on a minor channel such as Sky One, and then on one of the major UK terrestrial channels after a decent delay – and this critic only gets to watch British TV as broadcast (no preview tapes for Evelyn). Or should the review appear after the first viewing of the first episode of a series? Or only after the first viewing of a whole series? Such commentaries are often again precluded because, while the critic may have access to minority channels, the majority of the audience is in all probability anxiously awaiting the first appearance on British terrestrial TV, and would bitterly resent a review that would spoil their first contact with that episode.

Thus has summer in this household been tainted with the exquisitely tangled agonizing over what to write about in the next Evelyn Lewes column – because in almost the same

week that Sky One showed the triumphant close of the first series of *Dark Angel*, so also did they air the close of the fifth series of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

Then, last Thursday, better half rushed home early from work and we sat down to watch the first airing of the first episode of the fifth series of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*Buffy5*) on terrestrial television (BBC2) in the UK. And what a multiple joy it was too. When Sky One broadcast it ear-

lier this year, they broadcast it in 4:3 format; but it was made in widescreen (16:9) format, as was the fourth series (so we had the peculiar experience of watching the fourth series on Thursday evenings on BBC2 widescreen followed by the fifth series on Sky One on Friday evenings with the edges chopped off).

It is a relief at last to be able to report that in this episode the makers indulge both themselves and the audience, first by introducing the ultimate cliché for any vampire story, the arrival of the Prince of Darkness, Dracula himself, in the standard box of native soil, and then with the completely surprise introduction in the closing seconds of the episode of Buffy's sister, Dawn.

Of course, the people who commented that I should have researched *Babylon 5* on the internet will no doubt be screaming that they already knew about Dracula and Dawn, and so I should have known as well – but they appear to fail to comprehend that not everyone has access to the internet, and that even among those who do there are some viewers who would rather not know what is coming in their favourite TV show until they watch it. This is precisely the cause of the agonizing and relief that preceded this commentary. No doubt the same commenters will tell you that they already know how the series ends – as again do I, but I saw it on Sky One, not on the internet. I'll say no more

Above: Buffy (Sarah Michelle Gellar) and Dawn (Michelle Trachtenberg) in a wonderful, outraged, protesting, unison shout of "Mo-ommi!"

Below: Dracula, Buffy style, as played by Rudolph Martin



about that for now, other than that the ending is deeply shocking, and that I think the *volte face* that would have to open any sixth series had its seeds planted in this first episode of the fifth series, where Buffy takes on and manages to stake Dracula – but not before he mesmerizes her, drinks her blood (noting that she has been tasted before), and then makes her doubt her essential goodness by telling her that her powers spring from the same darkness as do his, and entices her to taste his blood, averring that it will not change her, as that can only happen when the victim is near to death and begging for it.

Buffy5 is filled with quite harrowing events, not all of which are foreshadowed in this first episode. However, the witty script and gorgeous photography work their usual charms, and the nice mixture of personal angst, trauma and tragedy with the work-a-day world of vampire slaying still carries off successfully what might otherwise be thought a trivialization of some great themes.

As for the introduction of the sister, Dawn (pronounced “Donn” or “Dahn” by various characters), this remains one of the cleverest and most controversial of the plot devices that the script team has come up with. Her existence is perfectly accounted for eventually, but I daren’t explain how or why here for fear of upsetting the fans who might be reading this but don’t already know. You’ll just have to linger over that wonderful, outraged, protesting, unison shout of “Mo-omm!” from both girls at the end of this episode, and trust that the producers do indeed know what they are doing.

All television series/serials sag in the middle of the season, so it came as a pleasant surprise to see how little this was true of *Dark Angel*. In my first column here I spoke of how wonderful the show is. There have been some surprising and some predictable plot twists, all to do with trust and betrayal within family or friendships, but its portrayal of a near future dystopia where human clones are being genetically engineered to make the perfect soldier has nevertheless been disturbingly compelling, from the shabby street-life sets reminiscent of nothing less than *Blade Runner* to the perfectly logical culmination of the final episode where Max at last gets it on with Eyes Only, only for it to turn out to be a dying dream as she is killed by the next-enhanced-generation-clone of herself.

Like Buffy and Xena, she is not allowed to stay dead, but unlike them she is resurrected here in a surprise forward-link to the next series that, while very cleverly executed, was a



Above: Dracula shows his teeth, then Buffy introduces him to her good friend, Mr Pointy.

Below: *Dark Angel* “...Max only has three expressions...” and none of them is the smile



moving and human moment as well. I sincerely hope that *Dark Angel* gets a proper airing on terrestrial TV in Britain soon, not only so that more of you can get to see it, but also so that I can see it in widescreen (unlikely, as I’ve just noticed it is rerunning on Saturdays on Sky One. Heigh ho).

It has been said in my hearing that Max only has three expressions, and I can see where this observation comes from, but what else would you expect from lips that plumped up with collagen? Far more distressing to me is her complete inability to creep convincingly – where most actors would bend over and generally reduce their profile, she has this amazing ability to creep by simply bending her legs, leaving her torso and head fully upright. It’s a small thing to complain of, but when they get all the big things right, this is all that’s left to us critics.

This brings me to another great predicament of the television critic: what to say when there is nothing good to say about a programme. It is dispiriting for all concerned when a critic can only find fault, so it is with no little glee that I can report that, on the same day that I finally found a secure anchor for comment on *Buffy5*, a good episode of *Babylon 5* appeared on the Sci-Fi Channel. Unfortunately for Straczynski fans, it was the Neil Gaiman-scripted “Day of the Dead,” and it contained an object-lesson in how to introduce characters, engage our interest and emotions on their behalf, and then use that engagement to both instruct and entertain us.

The episode has all the usual *Babylon 5* solecisms, unbelievable science and clanking plot markers that some people seem to admire – plus a brave attempt to introduce a discussion of humour as personated by a visit from Rebo and Zootie, played by real-life comic team Pen and Teller (with the voice of Harlan Ellison as the mechanical voice of Teller – isn’t this rather a lot of guest stars?). And here I have to complain of what I have come to term the *Friends*-ification of a lot of television, but especially *Babylon 5*. With main characters as grand as the President of the Intergalactic Alliance and Prime Minister (soon to be Emperor) of the Centauri, I would expect a little more *gravitas*. Instead, we get characters whose buffoonery would not look out of place in *Friends*. G-kar doesn’t want to be in the part of the station that will experience The Day of the Dead – so he takes a blanket and sleeps on the floor of the control room, the way Joey might sleep on the girls’ sofa if Chandler had brought home friends he didn’t want to be with. Sheridan and Delenn (President and Ambassador, but now a married cou-

ple) invite Rebo and Zootie to dinner, an intimate little two-on-two occasion. Am I alone in thinking it improbable that the President and his wife would have major visiting dignitaries who are only visiting for one day to a quiet little *tête-à-tête*? Or that Sheridan would then interrupt dinner to go and investigate the strange missing bit of the station? On his own! Doesn't he know what minions are for? And his investigative test? He throws a fire extinguisher at the force-field, and it bounces back and he has to duck. Oh how I wished he hadn't. Ducking, I mean.

The real focus of the episode was a meditation on the meaning of death, embodied by two wonderful but, by definition, ephemeral characters – both are women who died young – from the personal histories of two of the regular characters (I know, I know, there were four visitors, but only two were actually interesting).

Briefly, *The Day of the Dead* is a Brakiri religious festival. The Brakiri buy the station, just for the night, to make sure it's Brakiri soil, then, somehow, a piece of the station is transported to their home world for the festival (why they need to buy the whole station, and why only a piece is transported is never addressed) (and Sheridan calls it "a square mile of the station", but I'm pretty sure it was actually three-dimensional). The people who are in that bit of the station get to experience the Brakiri revelation, which is that someone from their past is resurrected and spends the festival with them, but vanishes come the following dawn.

The actual *Day of the Dead* is instigated by a particular comet passing close to the Brakiri home world; only this comet can cause the effect – as it is the only one in the system and it only passes once every two hundred years. The only comet in the system? Say it with me – puh-lease! *The Day of the Dead* takes place at night – "we're a nocturnal race," avers a Brakiri, during the normal "day" of Babylon 5. So, conveniently, the action takes place at "night" on Babylon 5, when most characters are in their quarters trying to sleep (despite there being no reason to have "night" on B5, despite there being no reason for B5 to be synchronized with the Brakiri home world, and despite the implication of the word "night" – that the Brakiri world must have a day, which implies their planet rotates, which implies that the night would only be a part of their rotational cycle but that it would nevertheless be night somewhere on the planet for the full 24-hour-equivalent of their planet's rotatory cycle, which must therefore be much longer than the "night" that



Above: Mira Furlan as Delenn and Bruce Boxleitner as President Sheridan
Below: Bridget Flanery as Zoe, and Tracy Scoggins as Captain Lochley –
"...we need a little mystery once in a while..."

contains the events of "Day of the Dead" and that ends at "planetary sunrise," whatever that might be).

These parenthetical chains of logic are typical of what runs through my head during a normal episode of *B5*, which to my mind is evidence of the lack of anything better in front of my eyes to think about – where other television science-fiction shows might be equally riddled with inconsistencies, they do more successfully distract me from nit-picking. However, once the situation of this episode was set up and the characters settled in for their night's revelation, the actual telling picked up noticeably, and with it my interest.

Four regular characters are presented with avatars from their own pasts. Londo and Lenier are of little interest as they are not human, and therefore not amenable to human empathy – and indeed their revelations seem more to do with the plot than their lives. The other two encounters are, however, worth sitting through all this drivel for. They concern two human protagonists.

The visitor to Lochley (the latest captain of Babylon 5, and, with a peculiarly soap-operatic twist, initially unrevealed first ex-wife of Sheridan, played by the beautiful Tracy Scog-

gins), is an earnest but tragic figure called Zoe (played by Bridget Flanery) who committed suicide while she was living with Lochley when they were both very young. Whether or not the relationship was sexual is left unclear, but what is clear is that they cared deeply for one another. As a result of Zoe dying, Lochley was rescued by her father, and joined the military and consequently is here today because of that death – but she is not sure whether it was an accident or suicide. Lochley has to use a password to access some computer gibberish, and it says a lot about her character and how much this visit means to her that the password is two words – "Zoe's Dead."

Zoe has brought a message from Kosh, another now-dead character, for Sheridan – "when the long night comes, return to the end of the beginning," typical hollow *B5* mystification-masquerading-as-mysticism tosh (and it is some comment on the actors' accents that, until I saw this name written down, I believed this character was called "Karsh.")

As Zoe is telling this, she realizes that dawn is coming, and quickly tells Lochley that she did commit suicide, apparently to let Lochley escape the relationship into the life she is now leading; the disappearance itself is very delicately handled.

The other interesting visitor, Dodger (played superbly by Marie Marshall), is an old comrade/flame from Garibaldi's past who introduces herself, when the Captain calls Garibaldi, as "killed in action." Garibaldi asks her what wisdom she brings, and she responds that she only knows two things. I missed the first, but the second is the wonderfully memorable statement, "Any poem by Emily Dickinson can be sung to the tune of 'The Yellow Rose of Texas.'" She is miffed that Garibaldi responds to the Captain's request for him to re-establish comms with Babylon 5 rather than paying her attention (the sex in *B5* becomes much more overt in this final series, with Lyta the telepath recently uncovering all kinds of plot-secrets during her orgasmic rapture with Byron) and says, "you know, some guys would be flattered that a not entirely uncute dame returned from the dead to spend a night of lust and passion with them ... I mean – it's some guys' fantasy: a love-hungry redhead who will disappear in the morning, never to be seen again." Unlike the other avatars, she has arrived naked (in his shower), and is at this moment wearing only one of his shirts and showing lots of leg.

It would be difficult for anyone not to fall for this lovely young woman, but the culmination of her visit comes



when, while she demonstrates the truth of her earlier assertion about Emily Dickinson, Garibaldi makes some trite remark about how they might meet up in heaven later, and she quotes Dickinson again –

Parting is all we know of heaven,
and all we need of hell

and vanishes, leaving Garibaldi humming tunelessly what might be the tune to “The Yellow Rose of Texas.”

The sensitive depiction of tenderness and longing and the insight into the unexpunged pain of the regular characters that these avatars evoke almost made it worth having watched the whole series. Almost. For this fine and telling moment is a single high point in what has otherwise been an almost uniformly dire series, one that I simply could not have sustained the interest to watch weekly, and which has strained my patience daily, although it did lead to one memorable moment when I fell off the sofa, I was laughing so much.

In another memorable episode, Michael York makes a guest appearance where he believes he is King Arthur, and, as Zoe and Dodger have done here, steals the show from the regulars. It is perhaps inevitable that such newly-introduced characters only highlight the progressive lignification that affects all the long-term actors of *Babylon 5* – but I can’t help feeling that the production team should have been aware of this problem and done something about it.

The final predicament of a television critic is the way it is possible to bore silly their nearest and dearest while attempting to isolate the reasons a bad programme is bad. A visiting friend was horrified recently to find I had been watching *Babylon 5*, as she is an ardent and long-term fan, and we had a strained weekend while

I pointed out endless examples of clunky dialogue, inept plotting and planky acting. Finally, though, she had the last word. “It doesn’t matter what you say,” she said. “It won’t change the fact that I enjoyed it at the time.” It’s a shame, but she’s right. It doesn’t matter what I say, because the programmes are all made, delivered and paid for before they ever hit our screens. Book or film reviewers can hope to affect (even if only a little) the success of a product by pronouncing judgement on it when it first appears. With television, all the buying decisions have been made long before the critic, never mind the audience, gets a first peek, so all that remains is for the audience to ignore or rave, and for television critics to try to make their voices heard above the clamour. I shan’t write about *Babylon 5* again unless you, the readers provoke me to, as I prefer to address the positive aspects of fantastic television, and there are not enough in *Babylon 5* to fill more than this one column.

Watching the series unfold over the past months, daily on the Sci-Fi Chan-



nel, it has become plain that, as Tim Robins has observed elsewhere, it is a kind of American *Doctor Who* – a good idea with a trunkful of dressing-up costumes. But, unlike *Dr Who*, here these have led to an overblown and overrated television serial that has been taken up by fans of the fantastic starved for anything better. I would be please if I could like *Babylon 5* as well, if only because it challenges the sometimes dreary hegemony of the *Star Trek* universe. In many ways Garibaldi appears to be Straczynski’s voice in the show, given his hobby of watching 20th-century cartoons which some of the episodes of *B5* appear to resemble, so when he observed in a recent episode that humanity defines its periods of activity by the wars it fights, it struck me that, while this is a hideously bleak view, it does encapsulate exactly what has become apparent about *Babylon 5* – that there is too much accent on war as the setting for its story-telling. Whatever happened to the finer aspirations for space-faring races adumbrated by Gene Roddenberry in his visions of the future? I refuse to lower my standards to this level, and will hold out for something that convinces in story, character and setting using actors who can act and speak dialogue that persuades by means of its innate truth. For a few sublime moments, Neil Gaiman shows here how this is done – indeed he even puts his philosophy into Captain Lochley’s mouth – “I think we need a little mystery once in a while.” It is only a shame his example came too late in the run for Straczynski to learn anything useful from it.

Next time, Roddenberry’s *Children* – how *Andromeda* and *Earth: Final Conflict* are faring in a world unfairly dominated by their elder sibling, *Star Trek*.

Evelyn Lewes

One of the most basic plot devices in science fiction is the discovery that all of human history has been helpfully (or unhelpfully) tweaked by unimaginably ancient aliens indistinguishable from angels (or devils), and in this late phase of sf's history it is manifest in the strategy of most cutting-edge authors. Never before, in a genre always notable for the way in which ideas and arguments are borrowed, sampled and twisted into interesting new shapes by subjecting them to the Procrustean bed of brand new scientific paradigms, has there been so much re-engineering and reshaping of old themes and tropes passed down from the Great Old Ones of science fiction's Golden Age. It's something for which British sf writers seem to have a peculiar talent; one possible reason why they seem to be, for the first time in a quarter of a century, at the forefront of sf's development, and why we're about to consider three fine, powerful novels by British writers who have taken up some very basic sf tropes and powerfully warped them to their own ends.

Origin (HarperCollins, £16.99) is the third and final volume in Stephen Baxter's "Manifold" trilogy, and the third variation in his exploration and explication of alternate solutions to the Fermi Paradox. "If (aliens) existed," the great Italian physicist said, "they would be here." In other words, since we live on a relatively young planet in a 15 billion-year-old universe, there has been plenty of time for alien civilizations to have visited or even colonized the Earth; since they have not, we must be alone. In the first volume of the trilogy, *Time*, humans were indeed the only intelligent species, because of a special condition woven into the history of the universe; in the second, *Space*, intelligent life was everywhere, but galaxies were regularly swept clean of advanced civilizations by gamma-ray bursters caused by the collision of neutron stars. *Origin* describes the point at which the axes defined by its predecessors cross, combining Baxter's trademark riffs on cosmology and the fate of intelligence in Deep Time with a good old-fashioned story of the exploration of a strange world that one day swims into Earth's skies.

That world, the Red Moon, suddenly displaces our own moon, with the simultaneous appearance high above Africa of a wormhole which briefly links the two worlds. Reid Malenfant and his wife, Emma Stoney, heroes of the previous two volumes in the trilogy, are flying close by, between appointments on a NASA educational tour. When Malenfant changes course to investigate the wormhole, which is

New for Old

Paul McAuley

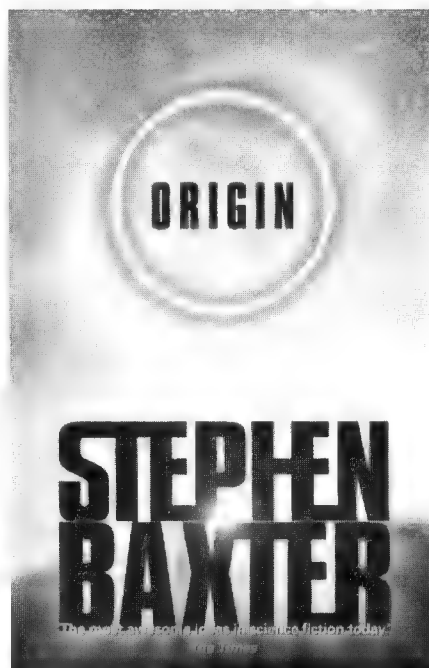
disgoring living specimens of a hominid species ancestral to modern humans, their little plane is wrecked. Malenfant bails out and escapes; Emma vanishes into the wormhole, which turns out to be a short-lived link between Earth and Red Moon. While Emma struggles to survive on a savage world populated not only by a variety of hominid species, but also by human travellers from alternate Earths (most notably a vividly drawn crew of pseudo-Victorian space travellers), Malenfant allies himself with a Japanese scientist, Nemoto, who believes that the appearance of the Red Moon and the rain of hominids are "intimately bound up with us: what it is to be human – and

why we are alone in the cosmos." In this incarnation, Reid Malenfant is a far more vulnerable hero, obsessed not with saving or changing the universe, but with rescuing his wife (and saving his marriage). Bypassing NASA (which as in many of Baxter's novels is a bureaucratic dinosaur overtaken by the fleet-footed small mammals of private enterprise), Malenfant and Nemoto bootstrap a mission plan and arrive on the Red Moon just before it is displaced into orbit around another Earth, this one populated by a highly advanced civilization which sends its own exploratory mission.

Like Larry Niven's *Ringworld*, with which it shares a narrow ring of habitable territory created by off-stage wizards and inhabited by different hominid species, the Red Moon is a prime example of the Big Dumb Object, an enigmatic construct ripe for exploration. And like all the best BDOs, it is an arena for Story, brimming with invention and niftily re-engineered tropes, most notably from Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* and the anthropological romances of H. Rider Haggard. Although the answers to the riddle of the Red Moon's existence are perhaps too easily won – Baxter extracts not very much tension from a perfunctory quest plot that ends in a lightshow – and the evocations of grand timescapes never quite mesh with the more prosaic but grim and densely imagined adventures in its hominid-haunted forests, this is an ambitious scientific romance constructed on a dauntingly grand scale. Baxter's evocations of the various mindsets of the half dozen very different kinds of hominids are vivid and immediate, and the story of the Red Moon not



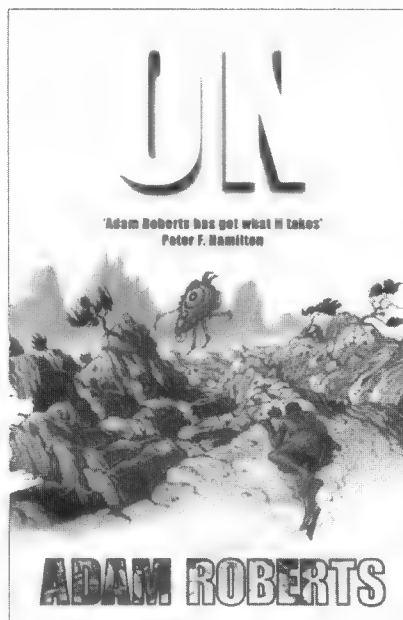
REVIEWED



only encompasses the history of the entire universe, but every possible history of Earth, using its pulpish adventures to illustrate a provocative discourse on the way chance variations in the formation of the Earth and Moon can affect the evolution of intelligence. *Origin* is an erudite work of hard science fiction that's deeply engaged with fundamental ideas, unafraid of difficult questions, and with a suitably transcendent payoff.

While Stephen Baxter invigorates well-worn tropes with an infusion of cutting-edge science, and uses them to buttress a dizzying yet cogent argument about the Big Questions of Life and the Universe (and Everything Else), his near-contemporary Ian McDonald plunders sf's vast store of eyekicks to construct baroque machineries gleaming with brass and bursting with steam and weird energies. Like Los Angeles's Watts Towers, McDonald's novels are fabulously eccentric bricolages drawing not only on sf, but also the huge junkyard of popular culture, and animated by an abiding and lively sense of human goodness. His latest, *Ares Express* (Earthlight, £16.99), is a sequel, sort of, to his widely acclaimed first novel, *Desolation Road*, first published in the United States 13 years ago, when the British sf scene resembled the gouged moraine of a recent glacial retreat, with spring just around the corner.

Like *Desolation Road*, *Ares Express* is set on Mars after it has been terraformed by godlike artificial intelligences, revolves around the railways which girdle the globe, and is a riotous carnival of magical realism, fable and scientific romance. But while *Desolation Road*, like its model, Gabriel



Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, was a metropolis of overlapping tales, *Ares Express* is mostly the story of Sweetness Octave Glorious Honey-Bun Asium Engineer, 12th daughter of the engineer and owner of the fusion locomotive *Catherine of Tharsis*. While running away from an arranged marriage, Sweetness discovers, through an encounter with the same time-travelling green man who joggled the narrative of *Desolation Road*, that because the ghost who communicates with her through mirrors is not her dead-at-birth twin sister after all, she is fated to be the Feisty and Resourceful (But Cute With It) Heroine of a world-changing story. In fact, the story she inhabits is merely one of many, a consensus maintained by the will of the world-engineering AIs operating deep at the quantum level of reality, and because of the ghost she carries, Sweetness is soon entangled in a cross-dimensional crusade against them.

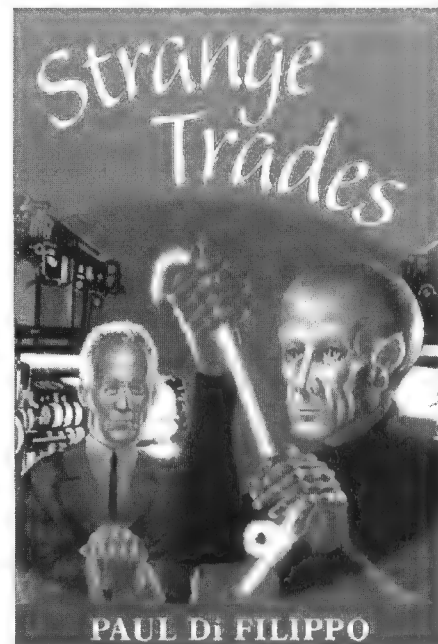
The plot involves time travel and (as in Baxter's *Origin*) carefully engineered reality shifts in a complex multiverse, and so is impossible to summarize; suffice it to say that it is the motor for a picaresque quest crammed with vivid characters, knockabout comedy and inventive setpieces, from aerial combat involving machine angels and a flying cathedral, child gangs skirmishing on the roof of a canyon city, a conman who tempts marks to gamble away their years, a plastic jungle, gunfights, pursuits, alarms and some very big explosions. With nods in particular to Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun* and just about every Mars novel every written, McDonald creates a pell-mell story that, as it knits itself up, knows full-well that in this particular genre

multiverse it's been told many times before, yet remains full of breathless delight at its own bravura exuberance. Highly recommended.

On (Gollancz, £10.95), Adam Roberts's second novel, combines two classic sf tropes, a catastrophic inversion of a single parameter of the natural order, and the magic kid who possesses the ability to heal the world, in a tough-minded lesson about the limits and limitations of heroism. The inversion is literal: gravity has been turned at right-angles, so that the surface of the world has become a vertical wall to which descendants of the few human survivors of the catastrophe must cling while attempting to eke out a precarious living. Tighe, the magic kid, is a ragged princeling in a village where a scant herd of goats is considered wealth, and loss of a single animal an economic catastrophe. His mother, given to visions and fits of irrational violence, terrorizes both himself and his father, but when both of his parents disappear, Tighe's life is turned upside down.

Forced to live with his stern, fanatical grandfather, Tighe flees punishment for attempting to pursue an illicit infatuation, and falls off the face of the world into a series of increasingly arduous adventures. Saved by a seeming miracle, he is recruited into a legion of kite-flying youngsters to fight in a religious war, but after a chaotic retreat from the enemy's advance through a vertical wood populated by relentless monsters – a genuinely harrowing sequence – he becomes a prisoner-of-war, is sold into slavery, rescued by an eccentric, casually cruel wizard who, commanding ancient technologies, has been experimenting with Tighe's family for generations.

Roberts limns the consequences of



his bold inversion with convincing detail, although his contention that the atmosphere would somehow rest upon itself rather than accelerating to lightspeed, just as any object dropped from the wall of the world would achieve perpetual motion, is rather wonky. *On's* main attraction is not hard sf worldbuilding, however, but its skilful subversions of the well-worn story of the picaresque adventures of a magic kid; Roberts's inverted world is crueller and far less friction-free than most in sf. Despite his unstinting determination to overcome his tribulations, Tighe is more pauper than prince, more unwilling pawn than hero. His war is full of pointless violence and confusion; it isn't clear if he really does possess the power to save the world; even his petty ambition to revenge himself on his grandfather is thwarted. *On's* breathless narrative ends (you should be warned) with an encounter so sudden and unexpected that it must almost certainly be (unless this is a final inversion so dark it closes out any possibility of reading it as anything

other than a self-corrosive corrective to every magic kid story) an unadvertised slingshot into a second volume.

In one of his unassuming and informative introductions to the eleven short stories collected in *Strange Trades* (Golden Gryphon Press, \$24.95, with an introduction by Bruce Sterling), Paul Di Filippo tells us that they are all about work. Well yes, but not exactly. What most of them are *really* about is the circulation of capital, of which work is one of the driving forces, and several are actually sly deconstructions of the work ethic; Di Filippo is at his best when writing about people who are trying to make a living somewhere in the bottom of the system, or who have dropped out of it altogether. The denizens of the post-hippy enclave in "Spondulix," for instance, who take a casual barter arrangement and parlay it into an alternate economy whose standard is the sandwich; the commune in "Harlem Nova," who offer an alternative to the information economy-driven reconstruction of New

York City; the slacker conspiracy story of "Conspiracy of Noise"; or the alliance between a crippled ex-soldier and the owner of the post-capitalist Karuna Koffeehouse, which at great cost overturns a sinister cabal of blood-crazed billionaires.

Elsewhere there's the proto-biopunk of "Skintwister" and "Fleshflowers," the cyberpunk of "Agents," the far-future tale of "The Mill" (which, despite being set on another planet in a post-human future, is at heart a crank-that-turned-the-revolution story about the clash between the dominant powers and the underclass), and the sinister fables of "Suits" and "The Boredom Factory." Di Filippo is one of the most prolific and eclectic short-story writers in the genre, and the stories collected here, their eccentric but neatly carpentered plots crammed with tasty bits of arcane knowledge, their characters engagingly human, are so much fun to read that reviewing them doesn't seem like work at all.

Paul McAuley

In *Passage* (Voyager, £11.99), Connie Willis is at her most relentlessly amiable. Throughout a large novel (nearly 600 closely printed pages), chock with involved dialogue and convoluted processes of evasion and miscomprehension, a pratfalling geniality presides, a weirdly decorous buffoonery, observed by all, even puffed-up New Age commen. Motivations are uniformly transparent (and usually rather silly); but what is plain to the reader is opaque to the characters, for a contingent blindness has hold of them. They stagger about in well-intentioned confusion, invariably at cross-purposes; for they, are, of course, like most Willis creations, participants in a screwball comedy. And yet: they are denizens of a great grey hospital. They are in Death's antechamber, and some of them (including one major player) shall die. Willis is doing an exemplary job, then, of capering on the brink of the abyss, of limning, with festive grace, our passages into mortality. Her death's-head grin is impeccable.

The subject of *Passage* is Near Death Experiences (NDEs), which to Willis's most gullible characters (they're all pretty gullible, but degrees are discernible) are consolations of happiness, premonitions of immortality. In *Mercy General* (which seems approximately contemporary), a glad-handing eschatology-monger, Maurice Mandrake, eager to garner fresh material for his bestselling tomes of afterlife advocacy, is wandering the wards, interviewing, and influencing towards his philosophy, various patients who have almost died, but

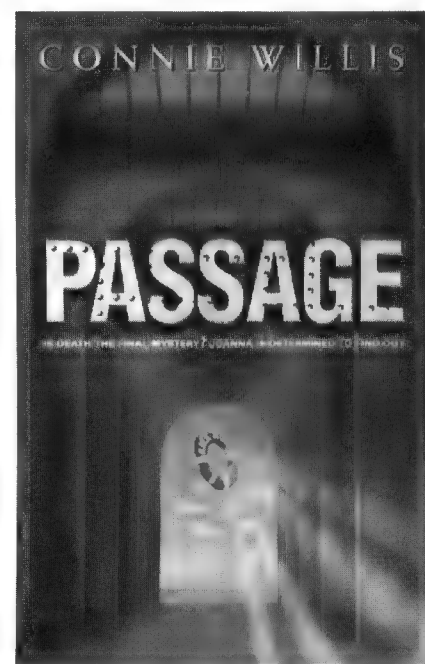
Passages

Nick Gevers

not quite. They have had visions, of tunnels or corridors or doorways with light at their ends, and in Mandrake's book (well, books) this is simple and direct in its spiritual significance. Angels and dead loved ones await, robed in light. But there is also a scientific investigation in progress, a collaboration between the neurologist Richard Wright (handsome bachelor, heedless of his charm) and the psychologist Joanna Lander (tentatively heedful of it). They have a technique of simulating NDEs, of inducing in volunteer subjects the essence of the experience without its usual medical extremity; and their analysis is proceeding, however haltingly, and whatever the blandishments and interference of Mr Mandrake.

A great amount of bureaucratic and interpersonal farce muddies the waters, of course. The hospital is a labyrinth of poorly planned and barely navigable passageways; its red tape is imposing; its politics is intimidating

when comprehensible at all. Mandrake's converts form a daft spiritualist chorus, a tormenting background noise for Richard and Joanna to tune out; and their volunteers are little better, mute, unco-operative, or prone to wilful confabulation. There is an unstated erotic tension in the partnership. And the enigma of the NDEs is profound: if they are not intimations of eternal life or random firings of the dying brain, what biological function can they have? Clues towards the answer are often to be found not in laboratories or patient interviews but in unexpected deductive leaps based on chance



associations, everyday incidents; and so the quest becomes total, an enterprise dominating every moment of the doctors' lives. There is huge comic potential in the ensuing blunders down mistaken paths and general intellectual woolgathering, and Willis plays it to the full. *Passage* is a hugely amusing novel, even if its humour strays towards the cute.

But there is Willis's serious purpose to consider as well: not merely her theory as to what NDEs signify (which is intriguing in its own right), but the fascinating literary architecture she is erecting. For in modelling the

moribund mind, she is also modelling the mind in absolute terms, designing a narrative structure to match its processes and a fictional setting to simulate them. *Mercy General* is a memory hospital, closely akin to the memory palaces so elaborately evolved in the fantasy novels of John Crowley, Jack Dann and Gill Alderman; in its contorted juxtapositions of logic and illogic, mercy and emergency, life and death, it epitomizes the chaos of the human brain even as it teases healing sense out of that chaos, like thought from the neural storm. The growth of order out of sheer anarchy – the generation of insight out of scattered

observation – has rarely found so comprehensive a metaphor in sf. And a more specific mental landscape takes shape as *Passage* develops, a case study of sorts: the version of the *Titanic* that Joanna visits in her own NDEs, a strange quasi-fictional summation of her disorientation and her courage. The country of the mind has acquired both shape and detail by the time the novel ends, captured in at least something of its true density and scale.

Passage is a big spry comedy of the brain, whose complexity and life so vividly defy entropy and death. Yet not forever...

Nick Gevers

The *Subtle Knife*, the second volume of Philip Pullman's "His Dark Materials" trilogy, ended on one hell of a cliffhanger, and many of us waited many months for *The Amber Spyglass* to appear. When it finally came out last year, I promptly devoured it... and was left feeling a bit cheated.

Given how strong on logic and consistency the previous books had been, the (admittedly mostly minor) lapses in the final volume proved more irritating than might have been the case in a lesser work. The theological axe-grinding is way too unsubtle, and far too much hangs on a completely arbitrary revelation near the end of the book.

Nevertheless, the book's virtues vastly outweigh its faults. I was delighted to be reminded of this fact when the Story Circle Production version arrived on my doorstep as a boxed set of ten audio cassettes. As with the previous volumes, Philip Pullman himself narrates while a cast of actors perform the dialogue. There are more than 40 actors this time, many reprising their roles, none of them putting in a duff performance. It may be trite to say that they bring the story to life, but it's one thing to imagine the President of the Consistorial Court as someone to be afraid of – quite another to feel one's blood chill on hearing Alex Norton's portrayal of the character.

Sean Barrett makes a welcome

Seven Spheres in Tibet: Audio Reviews

Paul Beardsley

return both as Iorek Byrnison the armoured bear and as Lord Asriel, characters we haven't heard since *Northern Lights*. This time we're treated to a lot more interplay between Asriel and Alison Dowling's wonderful Mrs Coulter – they are great together. The between-chapter bits are impressive too, with powerful readings from Blake, Milton, Marvell and so on, and with an appropriately eerie soundtrack accompanying Lyra's dream sequences.

The trilogy is generally regarded as fantasy, but there's a healthy dollop of top-notch science fiction in there as well. The quantum theory and modern cosmology are put to good use, the environmental consequences of conjoining worlds are dramatically explored, and the Mulefa are among the best-realized aliens I've come across in a long time.

This audio presentation is a wonderful enhancement of something that was already great. It's nearly 15 hours long, but the time flies by. Chivers Press and everyone else involved in this deserve a standing ovation, and everyone who loves intelligent fantasy should do themselves a favour and buy the complete trilogy on tape.

The Amber Spyglass (ten cassettes, 14hrs 55min, £29.99) is available from Chivers Press Limited, Windsor Bridge Road, Bath BA2 3AX (tel. 01225 335336; fax 01225 310771).

In common with *The Amber Spyglass*, the Doctor Who TV story *The Abominable Snowmen* begins with our heroes arriving in the Himalayas. The year is 1935, and Patrick Troughton's Doctor is keen to revisit the Tibetan monastery of Detsen, having been a guest there 300 years before in an untold adventure. Unfortunately the place is overrun with robots dressed in fur coats, controlled by the inaccurately named Great Intelligence, who has plans to destroy the world.

The Abominable Snowmen was broadcast in 1967; five of its six episodes were subsequently deleted. Only the soundtrack survives, with Frazer Hines providing narration. Generally remembered as a classic, it doesn't fare quite so well bereft of its visuals; nevertheless, this double CD provides some welcome indication of the flavour of this highly regarded era of the series.

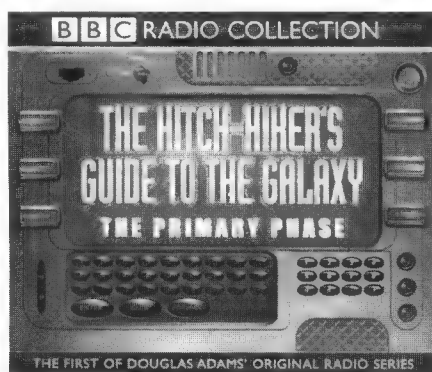
The six-part *Genesis of the Daleks*, on the other hand, survives intact – it's been repeated often enough since its first broadcast in 1975, and it's readily available on video. Back in 1979, when nobody had a video player, a cut-down version was released as an LP record, narrated by Tom Baker. A slightly revised version of this LP is available on a single CD. At one third of its original length, and bereft of its visuals, it's a vastly more attractive proposition than the TV serial – many of the story's absurdities



and boring bits are either glossed over or ironed out altogether. As a bonus, the CD also features *Exploration Earth: The Time Machine*, a 1976 radio play starring Tom Baker and Elisabeth Sladen which was made for schools in order to help make geography seem more interesting. Ironically, this is possibly the least educational Doctor Who story of all time.

In the wake of the shocking and untimely death of Douglas Adams, I was pleased to receive a CD set of the two radio series of *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to The Galaxy*. The story has been subsequently re-told in various media, and each version has its merits which add to the overall myth, but to my mind you can't beat the original.

Most people are familiar with the TV series, which tells essentially the same story as the first radio series (although the post-restaurant black ship sequence is very different). What makes the CD set an essential purchase is the second series, which enriches the fictional universe with concepts and worlds that are the more memorable for being throwaway; it also advances and (crucially) completes the story – even if it does this by ending on a never-to-be-



resolved cliffhanger. Whatever *ad hoc* approach Adams took to writing the series, the resulting narrative has a coherency that puts meticulously-planned multi-year story-arcs to shame.

Listening to it for the first time in several years, I was struck by how insightful, moving, exciting and evocative *Hitch Hiker's* can be. It is great sf; it's almost incidental that it is also very, very funny.

Doctor Who: The Abominable Snowmen soundtrack (two CDs, 2hrs 20min, £13.99), *Doctor Who: Genesis of the Daleks / Exploration Earth* (one CD, 1hr 20min, £9.99), *The Hitch*

Hiker's Guide to The Galaxy: The Primary Phase and The Secondary Phase (each comprising three CDs, 2hrs 55min, £15.99) available from BBC Radio Collection, PO Box 30811, London W12 0WN (tel 020 8433 2236; fax 020 8433 1040).

Hoorah for independent audio productions! *Pleasant Features and Other Stories of Suspense* is a CD consisting of six stories written and read by Peter Poole, who also did the cover illustration. (He looks like being a name to watch.) Like the better small-press magazines, this is cheap, cheerful, somewhat unpolished but bursting with enthusiasm. The stories aren't half bad either. Most kept me guessing, and one – about a murder victim hidden in plain sight – kept me on the edge of my seat. This sort of project deserves support; I wish there were more like it.

Pleasant Features (one CD, 1hr, £3.50) is available from Dream Power Pictures, PO Box 521, Hove, Sussex, BN3 6HY. Issues of the two-part comic *Stars and Gutters*, which features Peter Poole's artwork, are available from the same address at £1 each.

Paul Beardsley

It is salutary to be reminded that the longer short story form is also alive and well outside the pages of *Interzone*. What is especially pleasing is that the reminder should take such an exquisite form – from its wonderful jacket illustration through its solid hardback heft and acid-free paper to its top grade literate fantastic stories, *Stories for an Enchanted Afternoon* (Golden Gryphon Press, \$24.95) is a delight. It collects many of Kristine Kathryn Rusch's more recent award-winning and nominated stories into a volume that is a chastisement to the larger publishers who didn't produce this book themselves. Gary Turner and Marty Halpern at Golden Gryphon Press have stolen a march on his larger competitors by producing a beautiful book filled with beautiful stories.

And it would be silly to try to pick out a favourite among these tales. Rusch draws the reader effortlessly into the lives of people in the throes of difficult life decisions with a sensitivity that borders on telepathic, and all this with nary a war in sight. Here we have a step-mother having problems with an adopted child, there a reporter on a weird event at Mount Rushmore, and yonder a person whose job appears to be to surf the wave of popular culture, always staying just ahead of the peak. Conflict, sure, there's conflict; no one could write as many good novels as Rusch has without a deep understanding of how the conflict between human characters drives narrative. But, equally, without that deep understanding, no one could

Enchanting

Paul Brazier

have produced these enchanting stories that sometimes appear to slip from magical realism to supernatural to numinous and back all in a sentence while leaving the reader gasping at the emotional depth being revealed.

Let me be plain. Almost without exception, these stories are science fiction, with properly worked out backgrounds and believable technological projections. There is no vapid fantasy that is more wish-fulfilment than insight; rather we have an author with the strength of mind to work out what might happen in the future, the insight into character to grasp how that might affect real people, and the consummate skill as a writer to allow her to describe this in such a way as to be utterly compelling.

It is tempting to compare her to Le Guin, but that would be invidious. Rusch is as good, but entirely in her own way. From the shaky start of her fascinating first novel, *White Mists of Power*, she has gone on to write ever more tough-minded and perceptive novels, moving incidentally through

every genre – science fiction, fantasy, horror, dark fantasy, serial killer, vampire, *Star Trek*, and (I was delighted to discover recently) romances (as Kristine Grayson). However, while this gives me several more novels to investigate, it is an astonishing treat to have these eleven stories from her in one volume with no apparent diminution in quality. If, like me, you like science-fiction stories that have a heart as well as a mind, you will love this book. Do yourself a favour. Buy, beg, borrow or steal it; but read it.

Paul Brazier



BOOKS RECEIVED



AUGUST 2001

This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

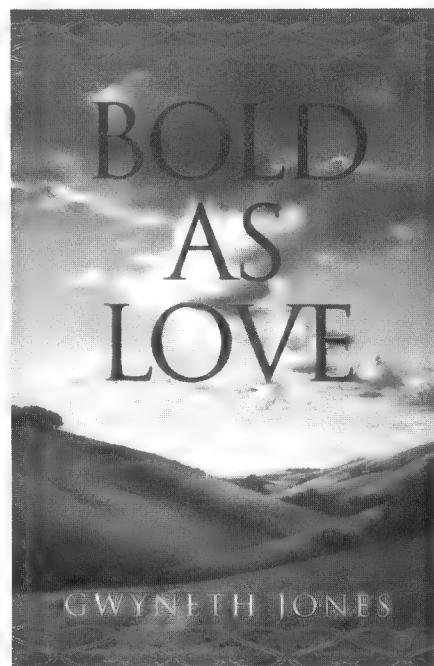
Abnett, Dan. **Honour Guard.** "Warhammer 40,000. A Gaunt's Ghosts Novel." Games Workshop/Black Library [Willow Rd., Lenton, Nottingham NG7 2WS], ISBN 1-84154-151-6, 312pp, A-format paperback, cover by Martin McKenna, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition; although we haven't listed any before, this is at least the fourth "Gaunt's Ghosts" title by Dan Abnett in the "Warhammer 40K" series; Abnett, who we hadn't previously heard of in any other context, is a former comics writer who resides in Kent and has become a mainstay of Games Workshop's little fiction factory.) *August 2001.*

Armstrong, Rachel. **The Gray's Anatomy.** Serpent's Tail, ISBN 1-85242-635-7, 240pp, trade paperback, £10. (Sf novel, first edition; described as "a cunning satire on mass media, sex, morality, the body, extraterrestrials and the shape of things to come," this is a debut work of "mainstreamer sf" by a British academic who "has published extensively in the field of the body and future evolution and is editor of *Sci Fi Aesthetics* and *Space Architecture*" [we haven't heard of either of those presumably non-fiction books].) *13th September 2001.*

Ashley, Mike, ed. **The Mammoth Book of Historical Whodunnits: Brand New Collection.** Robinson, ISBN 1-84119-080-2, xii+528pp, B-format paperback, cover by Julek Heller, £6.99. (Historical crime-fiction anthology, first edition; a follow-up to an earlier volume also entitled *The Mammoth Book of Historical Whodunnits* [1993], this is a bit off our beam generically – but it features work by at least three *Interzone* contributors, containing as it does a range of almost entirely new stories by Cherith Baldry, Mat Coward, Kate Ellis, Margaret Frazer, Peter T. Garratt, Philip Gooden, Susanna Gregory, Edward D. Hoch, Michael Kurland, Keith Taylor, Marilyn Todd, Peter Tremayne, Derek Wilson and others; it appears that only the story by Steven Saylor is a reprint [from *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, 1998].) *30th August 2001.*

Baxter, Stephen. **Omegatropic: Non-Fiction & Fiction.** British Science Fiction Association [1 Long Row Close, Everdon, Daventry NN11 3BE], ISBN 0-9540788-0-2, 160pp, small-press paperback, cover by Colin Odell, £8. (Collection of miscellaneous essays, plus two previously uncollected stories, by a leading British sf writer; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £20 [not seen]; many of these unbuttoned but interesting pieces first appeared in *Foundation*, *Vector*, *SFWA Bulletin* and *Interzone*; recommended.) *Late entry: 28th June publication, received in August 2001.*

Bear, Greg. **The Forge of God.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30107-5, 473pp, trade paperback, \$16.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1987; one of Bear's best; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 23.) *22nd August 2001.*



Berg, Carol. **Revelation.** "Book Two of The Rai-Kirah." Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-076-8, 485pp, C-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; a follow-up to the debut novel *Transformation* [2000] – by a new, but not young, American writer [born 1948].) *6th September 2001.*

Boucher, Chris. **Psi-Ence Fiction.** "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53814-7, 283pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Fourth Doctor and Leela.) *No date shown: received in August 2001.*

Bunch, Chris, and Allan Cole. **Sten 7: Vortex.** "Over one million Sten books sold worldwide." Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-082-2, 403pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1992; seventh in a decade-old paperback-original space-opera series, now appearing in the UK for the first time.) *6th September 2001.*

Card, Orson Scott. **The Folk of the Fringe.** Afterword by Michael Collings. Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-312-87663-7, 272pp, trade paperback, cover by Glenn Bellamy, \$12.95. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1989; it consists of five linked stories, three of which were originally published in *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine*; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 37.) *22nd August 2001.*

Carr, Caleb. **Killing Time: A Novel of the Future.** Warner, ISBN 0-7515-3075-1, 310pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; Caleb Carr is hitherto best known for his New York-set historical mysteries *The Alienist* and *The Angel of Darkness*; here he turns to sf, with a story set over 20 years in the future in a world "drowning in information"; the most remarkable thing about this piece of dystopian mainstreamer sf is that a shorter version of it was serialized in *Time* magazine, a news-weekly which doesn't publish fiction, much less serials – except when it does, evidently.) *6th September 2001.*

Chambers, Stephen. **Hope's End.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87349-2, 319pp, hardcover, cover by Andrew Burward-Hoy, \$23.95. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; set on another planet, but apparently fantasy, it's a debut novel by a new, young American author who began writing it when he was in high school.) *29th August 2001.*

Cox, Greg. **The Rise and Fall of Khan Noonien Singh: The Eugenics Wars, Volume One.** "Star Trek." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-02127-3, 404pp, hardcover, cover by Keith Birdsong, £14.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2001; this is the American first edition of July 2001 with a British price added.) *20th August 2001.*

Coupland, Douglas. **All Families Are Psychotic.** Flamingo, ISBN 0-00-711751-5, 279pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Mainstream novel with possible sf elements, first published in Canada [?], 2001; Coupland [born 1961] is one of Canada's most prominent younger novelists, author of *Generation X*, *Shampoo Planet*, *Girlfriend in a Coma*, etc; we are not quite sure why we have been sent this, but it does have a cartoon of a silver rocketship on the cover, and seems to concern NASA astronauts [in part at least]; it's dialogue-heavy, and looks to be funny; Tom Wolfe commends Coupland on the back cover.) 10th September 2001.

Dart-Thornton, Cecilia. **The Ill-Made Mute: The Bitterbynde, Book I.** Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-90753-1, 437pp, hardcover, cover by Paul Gregory, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; as is reputed to be happening throughout Eastern Europe and Russia, new Australian writers seem to be throwing themselves into the Big Commercial Fantasy genre with gay abandon; this debut tome is one of the more highly-praised examples from Down Under.) 21st September 2001.

Datlow, Ellen, and Terri Windling, eds. **The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror: Fourteenth Annual Collection.** St Martin's Griffin, ISBN 0-312-27544-7, cxi+556pp, trade paperback, cover by Thomas Canty, \$17.95. (Horror/fantasy anthology, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at \$29.95 [not seen]; as usual, the prefatory material is massive in extent, with detailed year's summations by the two editors, a media summation by Edward Bryant, a comics round-up, obituaries, etc; the body of the anthology contains reprint stories and poems, all first published in 2000, by Jack Cady, Ramsey Campbell, Jonathan Carroll, John Crowley, Jack Dann, Terry Dowling, Andy Duncan, Charles de Lint, Harlan Ellison, Louise Erdrich, Dennis Etchison, Esther M. Friesner, Neil Gaiman, Nalo Hopkinson, Jack Ketchum, Kathe Koja, Terry Lamsley, Tanith Lee, Kelly Link, Paul J. McAuley, Delia Sherman, Jane Yolen and many others; another impressive line-up; recommended.) 20th August 2001.

Dick, Philip K. **The Man in the High Castle.** Introduction by Eric Brown. "Penguin Classics." Penguin, ISBN 0-14-118667-4, xii+249pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Alternate-world sf novel, first published in the USA, 1962; it's good to see a Dick novel getting the Penguin Classics treatment, with an eye-catching silvery cover, and it's good to see Eric Brown being invited to introduce it; highly recommended.) 27th September 2001.

Di Filippo, Paul. **Strange Trades.** Introduction by Bruce Sterling. Golden Gryphon Press [3002 Perkins Rd., Urbana, IL 61802,

USA], ISBN 1-930846-05-3, xii+343pp, hardcover, cover by Frank Kelly Freas, \$24.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; eleven witty and various stories, comprising Di Filippo's fifth collection; as it happens, none are from *Interzone* [even though he has been prolific in these pages] – these pieces first appeared in *Amazing Stories*, *Back Brain Recluse*, *The Edge*, *Fantastic Stories*, *F&SF* and *Science Fiction Age*; reviewed by Paul McAuley in this issue of *IZ*.) October 2001.

Douglass, Sara. **The Nameless Day: The Crucible, Book One.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-710845-1, viii+584pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £6.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 2000; the beginning of a third trilogy, set in an alternative 14th-century Europe, by Australia's most successful Big Commercial Fantasy author.) 17th September 2001.

Dozois, Gardner, ed. **The Year's Best Science Fiction: Eighteenth Annual Collection.** St Martin's Griffin, ISBN 0-312-27478-5, xlvii+617pp, trade paperback, cover by David A. Hardy, \$18.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; as well as the usual large introduction and year's summation, it contains meaty stories, all reprinted from the year 2000, by Stephen Baxter, M. Shayne Bell, Albert E. Cowdrey, Greg Egan, Eliot Fintushel, Peter F. Hamilton, John Kessel, Nancy Kress, Ursula Le Guin, Paul J. McAuley, Ian McDonald, Susan Palwick, Severna Park, Alastair Reynolds, Lucius Shepard, Brian Stableford, Charles Stross [twice!], Michael Swanwick, Steven Utley, Robert Charles Wilson and several

others; two of the selections are from *Interzone* – Stross's "Antibodies" and Hamilton's novella "The Suspect Genome"; recommended.) 18th August 2001.

Drake, David. **Mistress of the Catacombs.** "Continuing the beloved and acclaimed series *The Lord of the Isles*." Tor, ISBN 0-312-87387-5, 464pp, hardcover, cover by Donato, \$26.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; Big Commercial Fantasy bloot, a follow-up to *Lord of the Isles* [1997], *Queen of Demons* [1998] and *Servant of the Dragon* [1999].) 24th September 2001.

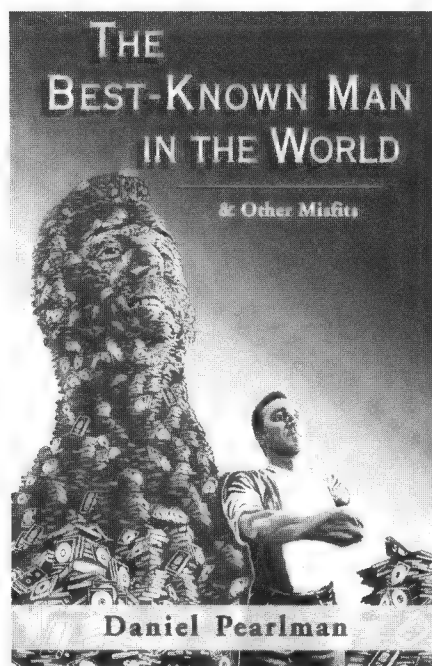
Erikson, Steven. **Deadhouse Gates: A Tale of the Malazan Book of the Fallen.** Bantam, ISBN 0-553-81311-0, 943pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2000; second of a promised ten-volume sequence of massive tomes by this Canadian author; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 159.) 6th September 2001.

Farren, Mick. **More Than Mortal.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87901-6, 383pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Horror novel, first edition; another in the author's "Victor Renquist" series of vampire thrillers, following *The Time of Feasting* [1996] and *Darklost* [2000]; Mick Farren, we are told, has now published 16 novels and five non-fiction works, and has also released eight albums; this book looks like deliberately old-fashioned, British-flavoured, "black magic" tosh, reminiscent of Dennis Wheatley [though better-written than the works of that verbose master].) 22nd August 2001.

Finney, Jack. **Time and Again.** "Fantasy Masterworks, 20." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07360-8, 399pp, B-format paperback, cover by Richard Carr, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1970; a charming New York timeslip fantasy, long regarded as a classic in America but little-known in Britain; it's illustrated with photographs and old magazine drawings – quite effective in context.) 9th August 2001.

Goodkind, Terry. **Debt of Bones.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07256-3, 119pp, hardcover, cover by Keith Parkinson, £12.99. (Fantasy novella, first published in the USA, 2001; set in the world of the author's "Sword of Truth" series of Big Commercial Fantasies, it's an expansion of his novelette which first appeared in Robert Silverberg's anthology *Legends* [1998]; it's illustrated throughout with pencil drawings, although the artist doesn't seem to be named – is it Goodkind himself?) 16th August 2001.

Greenwood, Ed. **Elminster in Hell: The Elminster Series.** "Forgotten Realms." Wizards of the Coast, ISBN 0-7869-1875-6,



346pp, hardcover, cover by Matt Stawicki, \$24.95 or £17.99. (Fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition [apparently appearing simultaneously in the USA and the UK]; this appears to be the fourth in its particular sub-series about a wizard called Elminster; Wizards of the Coast, Inc., the company that absorbed TSR, Inc., and which has now been absorbed itself by Hasbro, Inc., is still churning these light gaming fantasies out in considerable numbers; Canadian author Greenwood is one of their mainstays.) August 2001.

Harvard Lampoon, The. [Henry N. Beard and Douglas C. Kenney.] **Bored of the Rings.** "Not a major film!" Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07362-4, x+228pp, small-format hardcover, cover by Douglas Carrel, £6.99. (Parodic fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1969; the title page carries the explicit subtitle "A Parody of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*;" authors Beard and Kenney were Harvard students when they wrote this little squib, and subsequently went on to found the magazine *National Lampoon*; the satire is, to say the least, broad – with "Dildo Bugger" standing in for Bilbo Baggins, etc, etc; this is the first UK, and first-ever hardcover, publication.) 20th September 2001.

Heinlein, Robert A. **Citizen of the Galaxy.** Hale, ISBN 0-7090-6800-X, 239pp, hardcover, cover by Derek Colligan, £17.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1957; this is another of Heinlein's esteemed "juveniles" – or, not to mince words, Boys' Books – which have provoked countless less effective imitations; inspired by Kipling's *Kim*, it's one of the best, and a good place to start if you haven't read any.) 31st August 2001.

Herbert, Brian, and Kevin J. Anderson. **House Corrino: Prelude to Dune III.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-75179-7, viii+590pp, hardcover, cover by Gerry Grace, £17.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA [?], 2001; the third volume of a trilogy which serves as a prequel to the late Frank Herbert's bestselling *Dune* [1965]; Brian Herbert is the original author's son; presumably the prolific Kevin J. Anderson ["over eleven million books in print worldwide in 22 languages"] has done most of the writing here.) 20th September 2001.

Jones, Gwyneth. **Bold as Love: A Near Future Fantasy.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07031-5, 308pp, C-format paperback, cover by Anne Sudworth, £10.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £16.99, which we listed here last month from an advance proof copy; a pre-publication extract from the opening of this novel appeared as "The

Salt Box" in *Interzone* 169; recommended.) 30th August 2001.

King, Stephen. **On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-82046-2, xv+367pp, B-format paperback, cover by Larry Rostant, £6.99. (Memoir-cum-writing manual, first published in the USA, 2000; the first half of the book is heavily autobiographical and makes gripping reading; the second half consists of tips about writing, petering out into a list of the author's favourite books of recent years; this paperback edition also contains, at the rear, a 12-page short story, "Jumper" by Garrett Addams, with this explanation: "The following short story was chosen by Stephen King as the winner of the competition run by Hodder & Stoughton in conjunction with the *Observer* newspaper.") 1st September 2001.

King, William. **Vampireslayer.** "A Warhammer Novel. A Gotrek and Felix Novel." Games Workshop/Black Library [Willow Rd., Lenton, Nottingham NG7 2WS], ISBN 1-84154-153-2, 299pp, A-format paperback, cover by Adrian Smith, £5.99. (Fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition; sixth in a "Warhammer" sub-series by erstwhile *Interzone*-contributor William King [born 1959], featuring his recurring hero-and-dwarf characters Felix Jaeger and Gotrek Gurnisson; the earlier novels were *Trollslayer*, *Skavenslayer*, *Demonslayer*, *Dragonslayer* and *Beastslayer* – all first published by Games Workshop in 1999-2001.) September 2001.

Knight, Tracy. **The Astonished Eye.** Introduction by Philip José Farmer. PS Publishing [98 High Ash Drive, Leeds LS17 8RE], ISBN 1-902880-24-2, 192pp, hard-

cover, cover by Alan M. Clark, no price shown. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; this is a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered hardcover copies; there is also a simultaneous "deluxe" edition [not seen]; the author is American [born 1954], and has previously written a western novel, *Beneath a Whiskey Sky*; the small-press PS Publishing's most substantial book to date [all their previous releases have been short novellas], this seems to be a piece of fantastical Americana, about a reporter for an "infamous tabloid newspaper" who encounters an alien from a crashlanded UFO... and other unlikely things.) No date shown; received in August 2001.

Le Guin, Ursula. **The Lathe of Heaven.** "SF Masterworks, 44." Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-951-1, 184pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1971; it has not often been remarked, but it seems self-evident to us that this was Le Guin's unabashed attempt to "do" a Philip K. Dick novel – and she carried it off with a fair degree of success.) 9th August 2001.

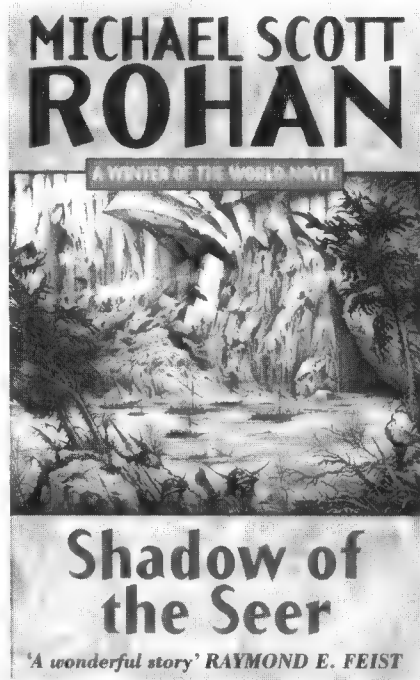
Lovegrove, James. **The Foreigners.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-791-0, 421pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2000; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 164.) 9th August 2001.

McAuley, Paul. **The Secret of Life.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-651330-1, 518pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2001; "a gripping near-future thriller for the Age of the Genome"; reviewed by Tom Arden in *Interzone* 166.) 3rd September 2001.

Marcellas, Diana. **Mother Ocean, Daughter Sea.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87484-7, cover by Tristan Elwell, 416pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; yet more large-format, long-paged BCF from an unknown author [American], this debut tome comes with pre-publication commendations from Elizabeth Haydon and Morgan Llywelyn.) 11th September 2001.

Moon, Elizabeth. **Against the Odds: Book Seven of The Serrano Legacy.** "The EXPLOSIVE final volume." Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-079-2, 548pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; more military space opera from this former U.S. marine author.) 6th September 2001.

Pearlman, Daniel. **The Best-Known Man in the World, and Other Misfits.** Aardwolf Press [PO Box 14792, Durham, NC 27709-4792, USA], ISBN 0-9706225-0-3, 256pp, trade paperback, cover by Frank Wu, \$14.95. (Sf/fantasy/indefinable collection, first edition; Pearlman's second gather-



ing: a dozen stories, most of them reprinted from small-press magazines, which come with back-cover commendations from such worthies as Jack Dann, Paul Di Filippo, Joe R. Lansdale and Jeff VanderMeer; it's a very nicely produced volume, the first to appear from this particular small press; for more information, see their website at www.aard-wolfpress.com.) 15th October 2001.

Rochelle, Warren. **The Wild Boy.** Golden Gryphon Press [3002 Perkins Rd., Urbana, IL 61802, USA], ISBN 1-930846-04-5, 260pp, hardcover, cover by J. K. Potter, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; about an Earth dominated by bear-like aliens, it's a debut novel by an American academic who is already known for his short stories and his criticism [the latter includes the book *Communities of the Heart: The Rhetoric of Myth in the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin*].) September 2001.

Rohan, Michael Scott. **Shadow of the Seer: A Winter of the World Novel.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-041-5, 584pp, A-format paperback, cover by Ian Miller, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; sixth in the generally praised series which began with the original "Winter of the World" trilogy [1986-1988], and was followed after a long interval by *The Castle of the Winds* [1998] and *The Singer and the Sea* [1999].) 6th September 2001.

Rose, Lloyd. **The City of the Dead.** "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53839-2, 278pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor; "Lloyd Rose" is a pseudonym of Sarah Tynyn, who may be a new writer.) No date shown: received in August 2001.

Saberhagen, Fred. **God of the Golden Fleece: The Fourth Book of the Gods.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87037-X, 378pp, hardcover, cover by Julie Bell, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; like its predecessors, *The Face of Apollo*, *Ariadne's Web* and *The Arms of Hercules*, it's set in ancient Greek times – in Mary Renault-land, but with more magic.) 22nd August 2001.

Shippey, T. A. **J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-261-10401-2, xxxv+347pp, B-format paperback, cover by Tolkien, £7.99. (Critical study of Tolkien's fantasy writings, first edition; the author's name is given as Tom Shippey on the cover and spine [but not on the title page]; a follow-up to his excellent book, *The Road to Middle-Earth* [1982; revised 1992]; as in that earlier work, Professor Shippey places Tolkien's fantasies in their 19th-century "philological" context as well as in a wider context of 20th-century imaginative literature; a stimulating, forcefully-

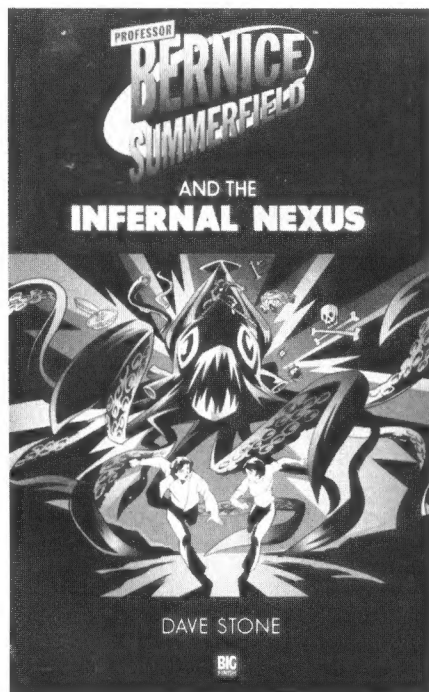
argued book; reviewed by Tim Robins in *Interzone* 171.) 20th August 2001.

Spinrad, Norman. **The Void Captain's Tale.** Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-312-86825-1, 222pp, trade paperback, cover by John Berkey, \$13.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1983; "Spinrad's best novel – a *tour de force*," according to Gregory Benford.) 24th September 2001.

Stewart, Ian, and Jack Cohen. **Wheeler.** "A novel of First Contact – and Earth's possible destruction." Earthlight, 0-7432-0743-2, 505pp, C-format paperback, cover by Bob Eggleton, £10. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; technically, this should be classed as a debut novel, but of course the authors are well-known British scientists who have already written many non-fiction books, both separately and together; it appears to be based, in part, on the same ideas as a Stewart-and-Cohen short story we published in *Interzone* in October 1998 – "Code of the Skydiver" [issue 136].) August 2001.

Stone, Dave. **Professor Bernice Summerfield and the Infernal Nexus.** "Bernice Summerfield, 4." Big Finish [PO Box 1127, Maidenhead SL6 3LW], ISBN 1-903654-16-5, 188pp, A-format paperback, cover by Adrian Salmon, £6.99. (Shared-world sf novel, first edition; latest in a new paperback-original series picking up from where Virgin Publishing's "New Adventures" left off.) Late entry: July publication, received in August 2001.

Swirski, Peter. **Between Literature and Science: Poe, Lem, and Explorations in Aesthetics, Cognitive Science, and Literary Knowledge.** Liverpool University Press, ISBN 0-85323-906-1,



xviii+183pp, C-format paperback, £15.95. (Critical study of ideas in the works of Edgar Allan Poe and Stanislaw Lem; first published in Canada, 2000; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £29.95 [not seen]; it appears to be more a work of philosophy than of literary criticism, concentrating, as the blurb tells us, on how the two subject authors "propose far-reaching hypotheses in aesthetics, epistemology, philosophy of science, and pragmatics as well as cosmology, artificial intelligence, and futurology"; note: this volume is not part of Liverpool University Press's "Science Fiction Texts and Studies" series.) Late entry: May publication, received in August 2001.

Tolkien, J. R. R. **The Lord of the Rings.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-712381-7, xviii+1137pp, B-format paperback, £14.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK in three volumes, as *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*, 1954-55; the original Big Commercial Fantasy novel [not that Tolkien ever intended it as such]; this is the first film tie-in edition with a cover illustration which is from that source – a green-hued photograph of Dark Riders a-riding; cover apart, this seems to be the 24th reprint of the UK all-in-one-volume, revised-and-corrected paperback edition, with a prefatory "Note on the Text" [dated 1993] by Tolkien scholar Douglas A. Anderson.) 3rd September 2001.

Warrington, Freda. **The Obsidian Tower.** "Book Three of The Jewelfire Trilogy." Earthlight, 0-7434-1607-4, 708pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; follow-up to *The Amber Citadel* [1999] and *The Sapphire Throne* [2000].) 20th August 2001.

Youll, Stephen. **Paradox: The Art of Stephen Youll.** Foreword by Kevin J. Anderson. Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85585-916-5, 128pp, large-format hardcover, cover by Youll, £20. (Sf/fantasy art portfolio, first edition; Youll [born 1965] is an American-resident British artist who has cultivated a highly "photo-realistic" style for his book covers; this is another colourful, well-produced book from Paper Tiger; recommended.) 27th September 2001.

Zahn, Timothy. **Angelmass.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87828-1, 430pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; described by the publishers as a "breakout epic science fiction novel," it appears to be in space-opera mode; Zahn has written a mass of hard sf for *Analog*, including the Hugo-winning story "Cascade Point," as well as a number of bestselling *Star Wars* spinoffs, so quite why he needs a "breakout" at this point in his career is no readily apparent.) September 2001.

Times, etc, every month depending on which programmes they feature and I buy *Interzone*, *Asimov's* and *F&SF* every month regardless of the authors, etc, they feature. I like sf in all media – books, TV, film, whatever – and don't regard TV as an inferior art form merely because it is accessible and relatively passive.

I do not regard *Interzone* and *SFX* as rivals. However, I have not read an article in *SFX* which has angered me as much as Lewes's piece did. Those media-based magazines actually come across as treating their readership with respect, not taking the so-called intellectual high-ground position of rubbishing things a lot of people like.

I do not expect any apology from Ms Lewes that is worthy of the name, since that does not seem to be within her nature. I would however like an explanation from the editor as to why he chose Ms Lewes rather than someone who actually knows something of the subject to write about television in *Interzone*.

Billy Stewart
Wembley, Middlesex

Evelyn Lewes comments: I am grateful to Billy Stewart for his thoughtful and evidently heartfelt letter. However, first, a word in defence of our Editor. He did not commission my work. As Billy Stewart similarly bemoans above, I felt there was a void where "Tube Corn" had once been, but rather than complain, I supplied an article to demonstrate what I thought was missing. To my combined surprise and delight, it was published.

Watching *Babylon 5* was a resultant self-inflicted induction to commenting on fantastic television – if I wanted to be taken seriously, I should try to give serious consideration to programmes that I had previously simply refused to watch. What little I had seen of *Babylon 5* had been uniformly risible. I decided I needed to find out whether or not I was right by investigating the whole thing. Watching the movies was an attempt to shortcut this process, which I can now see was a bad idea.

However, what appears here is an honest report of my reactions to what I see on the television (and my lack of information there is reflected in the columns on purpose – yes, I could research outside the programmes, but that wouldn't be commentary on television, would it?). Any misprision can be

attributed either to my inattention, or to the inability of the programme to hold my attention. In the case of the Minbari surrender-while-winning, the whole film was so comical I'm afraid I didn't pay close attention, and it appears I misunderstood as metonymy what was apparently a statement of (within the fiction) literal fact – not knowing there was a gone-before character called Valen, I thought "having the soul of Valen" meant simply having a human soul. Billy Stewart's explication tells me there was in fact a less numinous meaning to this episode than I attributed to it. All I do is convey as clearly as I can how I perceive something and why I think that is; it is for the reader who has seen the same programme to decide how appropriate my commentary is.

I value feedback such as this, and I am sorry this reader was upset (but I find it intriguing that, despite accusing me of "lying" about the content of the programmes, he correctly identified the episode from my description).

I can assure Billy Stewart that, far from hating science fiction on television, I live in the sincere hope that one day we will see something that lives up to or even exceeds our expectations.

Evelyn Lewes

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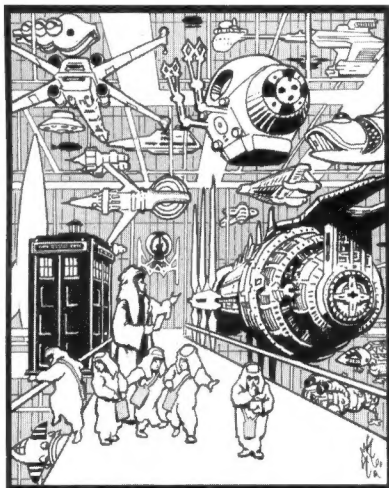
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